



THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT

*By the Same Author*

*Poems*

GREEN LIONS  
THE WHITE CRY  
ELEGY FOR AN AIRMAN  
SONNETS TO THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER  
THE DOSSER IN SPRINGTIME

*Verse Plays*

THE FIRE ON THE SNOW  
NED KELLY  
THE GOLDEN LOVER  
SHIPWRECK

*Short Stories*

A GIRL WITH RED HAIR

# The Flesh and the Spirit

*An Outlook on Literature*

*By*

**DOUGLAS STEWART**

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## THE WICKEDNESS OF SUCCESS

"MR GALLAGHER," said Mr Shean, "I must solemnly warn you never to become a successful professional boxer."

"Owing to a certain irrepressible boyishness of nature which makes me, when hit hard once upon the nose, disinclined for further combat," replied Mr Gallagher, "I am not likely to take the game up seriously. But I have always admired those who do, and why on earth should I not emulate them if I choose?"

"Because you will break your poor old father's heart," said Mr Shean.

"I have been able to maintain tolerable relations with my sire," observed Mr Gallagher, "only because he has had the supreme wisdom to refrain from heartbreak on all allegedly heartbreaking occasions."

"But the consequences to yourself," persisted Mr Shean, "will be even more devastating. You will end by breaking your neck."

"You unnerve me," said Mr Gallagher.

"You will be loved by a blonde," said Mr Shean.

"You terrify me," said Mr Gallagher.

"You will make a lot of money," said Mr Shean.

"You appal me," said Mr Gallagher.

"Shall we then," asked Mr Shean, "both write to Mr Clifford Odets and tell him that, having read his *Golden Boy*, we have unanimously decided not to become successful professional boxers?"

"I regret to inform you," said Mr Gallagher, "that I find myself wavering. There is something curiously attractive about money; and even blondes——"

"I have noticed it myself," said Mr Shean. "A charm. Almost a Temptation. And that is exactly Mr Odets's point.

As successful professional boxers we are inevitably corrupted by blondes and money."

"What shall we do to be saved?" asked Mr Gallagher.

"Our poor old father," said Mr Shean, "wants us to stay home and practise the violin."

"But successful violinists are also indescribably tempted by blondes and money," objected Mr Gallagher.

"Mr Odets must have forgotten that," said Mr Shean.

"Perhaps we had better be successful something-elses," suggested Mr Gallagher. "Supposing we settled down as a couple of successful fishmongers, leather-machinists, opticians, fruiterers or six-day bike-riders?"

"The blondes and the money would get us," said Mr Shean. "According to a Mr Harold Clurman who introduces Odets's play, the simple American-Italian youth who rashly becomes a successful professional boxer is a symbol of everybody who has to fight for success of any sort in a corrupt, capitalistic society abounding in money and blondes. I quote Harold Clurman:

"The story of this play is not so much the story of a prizefighter as the picture of a great fight in which we are all involved. What the golden boy of this allegory is fighting for is a place in the world as an individual; what he wants is to free his ego from the scorn that attaches to 'nobodies' in a society in which every activity is viewed in the light of a competition. He wants success not simply for the soft life—automobiles, etc.—which he talks about, but because the acclaim that goes with it promises him acceptance by the world, peace with it, safety from becoming the victim that it makes of the poor, the alien, the unnoticed minorities. To achieve this success he must exploit an accidental attribute of his make-up, a mere skill, and abandon the development of his real self."

"His real self, I take it," asked Mr Gallagher, "is the self that stays at home and plays the violin?"

"So his poor old father thinks," agreed Mr Shean. "We have an extremely pathetic curtain in an opening scene when Joe has decided to become a boxer and his poor old father, who has bought a violin for the boy's birthday, sadly decides that he can't give him the present. And then a little later when Joe has won a big fight and shouts,

'Hallelujah! It's the beginning of the world', his poor old father's heart is broken again and the stage direction says, 'Mr Bonaparte, lips compressed, slowly turns his head away'."

"Nobly repressing his despair," said Mr Gallagher. "And then at the end when this rash young man has been duly corrupted by blondes and money, has accidentally killed a man in the ring and has then accidentally killed himself in a motor smash, I suppose the poor old father's heart is finally and irrevocably broken?"

"On the contrary," said Mr Shean. "Mr Bonaparte seems to bear this last sad news with equanimity; with, indeed, something approaching satisfaction. I quote:

"Mr Bonaparte (*standing, his head high*): Joe . . . Come, we bring-a him home . . . where he belong . . . (*Slow fade-out*)."

"This revolting old man," said Mr Gallagher, "this monster of a parent who tries to keep his son at home playing the violin when he is thirsting for life and adventure; this ancient dimwit who cannot perceive that the young man instinctively and rightly prefers to be a good boxer rather than a second-rate violinist; this elderly prude who thinks that blondes and money—the delights and rewards of combat—are a corruption; this timorous old goat who has himself retired beaten from the struggle of life and tries to make a failure of his son before he has even started to fight and who obstructs him at every step of his career; this vulture gloating over the slain body of his son—he is, of course, the villain of the play?"

"The poor old vulture," said Mr Shean, "is the hero. Success is the villain. This play was recently performed by an amateur group in Sydney, and now when I walk the town I feel myself surrounded by young men and women all grimly determined not on any account to be successful professional boxers."

"An admirable resolution," said Mr Gallagher. "And, I am sure, a great comfort to their poor old American-Italian fathers."

## THE CULT OF THE PRIMITIVE

SINCE man lives upon the earth by the destruction of plants and the slaughter of animals, anybody who is liable to acute attacks of conscience can consent to go on living only on the assumption that man is a more desirable form of life than those he consumes. Though Bernard Shaw may doubt it, the no less sensitive Mr Smith decides that, as compared with the bullock, he is indisputably a superior being. So that he may continue to exist the bullock must continue to perish. And if someone with a soul even more delicate than Mr Shaw's informs him that, all forms of life being equally valid and holy, it is wicked to destroy plant life, Mr Smith is compelled to retort, however arrogant it may sound, that he is a superior form of life to the pumpkin and the potato.

I have been led to these subtleties by learning from the catalogue of the Primitive Art Exhibition at Melbourne National Gallery that Daryl Lindsay has felt "not a little humbled" before the exhibits.

When we try to decide impartially whether or not Mr Smith is justified in claiming superiority over the ox and the vegetable, we have to admit that we are biased. If he is not superior, we are all under a moral obligation to hang ourselves before our next meal. If the race of man is to continue to inhabit the earth we are compelled to admit the superiority of Smith. Nevertheless, Shelley and Shaw excepted, we all believe at heart that a completely detached observer would come to the same conclusion. Man is so clearly superior to the plants and beasts of the field that the question is not worth serious argument. But when we try to decide nowadays whether or not our arts are superior to those of primitive peoples, we are not at all sure of

ourselves. Daryl Lindsay feels "not a little humbled" before the carvings, drawings and sculptures of Australian aborigines, Papuan headhunters and African bushmen.

Robert H. Croll's essay in *Art of the Australian Aboriginal* is another case in point. Consider—in rather unfair isolation—the following extracts:

. . . until we proceeded to impose our "civilization" upon them.

Net bags and containers made of fibre or bark. . . . Their good taste challenges anything produced in our centres of European culture.

Elsewhere the native is bound usually by tradition and the practices of his fathers, and is as narrow in his outlook, however skilled or gifted, and as conservative as to method, as if he were the most bigoted pupil of a white man "school" of art.

Obviously and naturally, the aboriginal artists varied in ability and, just as naturally, the Streetons and Lamberts were scarce.

It would be absurd seriously to feel perturbed when Daryl Lindsay says he feels "not a little humbled" before his primitives: Wordsworth felt not a little humbled at the Lesser Celandine. And it would be absurd to suppose that Robert Croll really believes that, though scarce, there were Streetons and Lamberts among the aborigines of old. Both writers, in fact, eventually make it clear that they believe European art superior to primitive. Daryl Lindsay hopes that the Melbourne exhibition will "bring home to us very forcibly that art is a universal language—a connecting link between primitive man and his more civilized brother"; and Mr Croll concludes:

By whatever standards art generally is measured (and surely nothing provokes greater diversity of opinion) our aboriginal must be recognized as having the root of the matter in him, of possessing at least a spark of that lovely flame which lights all worthy canvases the world over.

Both the Melbourne exhibition and *Art of the Australian Aboriginal*, therefore, are primarily humanitarian in intention—apart, that is, from their ethnological interest. Assured of the superiority of Western civilized art, these critics take



a benevolent interest in the primitive works of primitive peoples: an interest to some degree artistic, for any work of art is worth looking at, and in the works of children of nature there may be a simplicity and a liveliness which could with some small profit be stolen to refresh our own arts; an interest to a large extent ethnological, but primarily benevolent, designed to make us realize our common humanity. Artistically and, therefore, spiritually, primitive man has "at least the root of the matter in him, a spark of the lovely flame". And as long as that is clearly understood I have nothing but the heartiest approval.

But why does Robert Croll find it necessary, when mentioning our civilization, to call it—in quotation marks—our "civilization"? Why did Paul Hasluck in his recent *Black Australians* also find it necessary to put the white civilization into quotation marks: "The idea of "civilizing" primitive people, though it smells in some nostrils, may not be wholly bad."

There is, as everybody knows, a tendency in politics to depreciate the value of our civilization—to doubt whether the white race, and the British in particular, were justified in extending their rule over so many primitive peoples; and that tendency is paralleled in the arts by the exaltation of primitive cultures and the disparagement of our own. Politically and culturally, our civilization tends to be regarded as a "civilization". Politically and culturally, the white race tends to abdicate. Instead of taking Bennelong across the seas to be driven nearly out of his senses by the glories and wonders of London, we go to Melbourne National Gallery to be driven nearly out of our own senses by white dots and wavy lines on bits of bark.

Our interest in primitive art is "ever increasing", says Leonhard Adam in an essay in the Melbourne catalogue.

This is obviously due to two reasons: first, the modern appreciation, or even popularity, of the æsthetic attractions of primitive works of art; and, secondly, the steadily growing practical importance of two scientific subjects, with which the study of primitive art is linked up, namely, Psychology and . . . Ethnology.

If we take an ethnological and humanitarian interest in primitive cultures, we still regard ourselves as a superior people, and I have no quarrel with us. Our civilization is widening and deepening. But is our civilization widening and deepening, or is it fraying out and decaying when primitive art becomes increasingly "popular"? I suspect a decadence, an abdication.

If we don't believe that our civilization is superior, we are in the moral predicament of the vegetarian. Man has no moral right to exist on the globe if he doesn't believe he is superior to the sheep and the cabbage, and the white man has no moral right to rule the world if he doesn't believe he has a superior civilization. Here, again, we are necessarily biased. We are compelled to believe in our superiority or else to abdicate. Therefore—except in momentary aberrations when our civilization goes into quotation marks or when Streetons and Lamberts are found among the old-time aborigines—we do believe in our superiority. And here, too, we are surely justified in assuming that a detached observer would agree with us.

With a certain amount of benevolent effort we might join Daryl Lindsay in "rating very highly the bark drawings of our own Australian natives, who seem to possess a certain delicacy of line all their own"; but we certainly believe that a detached observer would rate very much more highly the oil paintings of Elioth Gruner. We would find extraordinarily interesting the 42-foot rock carving of a whale at Narrabeen, near Sydney, which Charles Barrett describes in *Art of the Australian Aboriginal*; but the detached observer would hardly, we imagine, seriously compare it as a work of art with the Parthenon, or with Saint Paul's Cathedral.

It seems fantastic, and in bad taste, too, to be making such comparisons. It seems as absurd to bother about defending civilized art against the primitive as it would to defend man's right to eat. But because there is a cult of the primitive, because the white race does show a tendency to abdicate, and because our civilization does find itself in

doubting or damning quotation marks, that defence actually has to be made.

Primitive man himself certainly never had any doubts as to which culture was superior, his or ours. When Columbus arrived off America in a sailing ship the natives worshipped him as a god. If he had arrived in the *Queen Mary* or a Flying Fortress they would probably have lost their wits with wonder and admiration. When I am told of some ineffable superiority in the bric-à-brac of savage peoples, I recall that these peoples themselves once thought our arts—and the cheapest and meanest of them—so miraculous that they sold us half the world for objects we regarded as despicable trumperies: glass beads and blankets, mirrors and ribbons. The simple African negro had at least the wit to perceive that never during the centuries of his "culture" had he been able to devise a work of art so elegant as the top-hat. He would have felt himself unworthy to enter a temple of such magnificence as the average suburban bungalow. Not even in his dreams had he conceived that there could be shining taps, h. and c. For humanitarian and ethnological reasons I would gladly catch a train to Melbourne to look at Daryl Lindsay's primitives; but I do not forget that the primitive gentlemen themselves would have climbed high mountains and crossed wide plains to look with awe upon the glory of our average mass-produced floral carpet. And I must remember when I go home tonight that, though justly pleased with the "delicacy of line" of his own works of art, primitive man would have fallen on his knees before the patterned splendour of the lino. on my kitchen floor.

Not—it should be repeated—that Robert Croll and Charles Barrett are trying to foster the cult of the primitive. *Art of the Australian Aboriginal*, which they have written in collaboration, is a fascinating survey of the whole field of its subject. Charles Barrett, who has done most of the work, contributes chapters on "Aboriginal Art Galleries", "Antiquity of Petroglyphs", "Art in Arnhem Land" and "Rock Carvings in New South Wales"; C. P. Mountford

has an article on "Aboriginal Art in South and Central Australia"; Professor Elkin writes the foreword, and there are excellent illustrations. The frontispiece is from a painting of the MacDonnell Ranges, in Central Australia, by Albert Namatjira, the aboriginal artist who, instead of making a cult of the primitive, has very sensibly—and with notable success—set about mastering the art of the white man.

## THE HEROIC DREAM

For she had fiery blood  
When I was young,  
And trod so sweetly proud  
As 'twere upon a cloud,  
A woman Homer sung,  
That life and letters seem  
But an heroic dream.

IN everything W. B. Yeats did or said and in every spectacle or adventure which life presented to him, there seems to be something dreamlike, heroic, fantastic. Even while he was living it his life had the quality of a legend.

For that there are three causes: he did genuinely live, as in old age he informed his doctor, "a life of excitement" in strange and stirring times; and he had the artist's eye for the bizarre or the heroic in what to another man might have been unremarkable, seeing his life and his acquaintances as history would see them, larger than life, mythological; and, to some extent, he deliberately posed as a romantic figure. He chose to look legendary, as witness this glimpse of him beside Maud Gonne from Joseph Hone's *W. B. Yeats*, the excellent authorized biography:

In London what a curious sight they must have presented to the Cockneys—the young poet and the European beauty: the poet, with pale face and long hair and rich melancholy eyes, held her cloak and superintended the transport of the birdcages beneath the high, sooty arch of Victoria station; beside him Maud Gonne, as tall as he, eyes fiery from her Parisian politics, her clothes swirling with her long strides and wide gestures. Either alone would have arrested attention; together, with cloaks and birdcages, amid the fuss and paraphernalia of a railway station, they set the platform astare. Once he had to carry a full-grown Donegal hawk to her compartment,

The great formative influences on Yeats's life and poetry, however natural and normal they may have seemed when he experienced them—but he was never quite unaware of their strangeness—all seem fantastic and legendary at this day and at this distance from Ireland: the Rhymers' Club; magic and spiritualism; his love for Maud Gonne; Irish politics.

To the Rhymers' Club came "the tragic generation" (to which, incidentally, Christopher Brennan belonged in spirit); æsthetes who imbibed through the pipe of Mallarmé the subtle poison of Baudelaire.

Ernest Dowson came, faithful to Cynara after his fashion; Lionel Johnson came, a Greek miniature with Pater on his lips and a fatal thirst in his throat; Arthur Symons came and was described by Johnson as "an æsthete with a surfeit searching the music-halls sadly for commonplace pleasures". Francis Thompson and William Watson hovered in the background. Not associated with the club, but a crumbling pillar of the same decadence, was Oscar Wilde.

Poets wore cloaks and long hair. Everyone had his "weakness". Hone describes Yeats and Symons, who were temperate with alcohol, comparing themselves sadly with Dowson, feeling that their ability to resist temptation was possibly a weakness in them as poets:

They decided to have two whiskies every night at 12 to see if they could do without a third. When at the end of a fortnight they returned to their tumblers of hot water Yeats said, half-seriously, "Symons, if we had felt a tendency to excess we would be better poets."

If Yeats was unable to acquire a proper passion for alcohol, opium, prostitutes or suicide, he was at least able to turn with enthusiasm to the Occult. And Madame Blavatsky and her circle were quite as fantastic as "the tragic generation". When Yeats shaved his beard Madame foretold him a bad illness within six months "through the loss of the mesmeric forces that collect in the beard". A glimpse of Yeats at spiritual chess with MacGregor Mathers in Paris:

As a rule, though he evidently lived under a great strain, Mathers was a gay and companionable man. In the evenings he made his wife and Yeats play chess with him, a curious form of chess with four players. Yeats's partner was Mrs Mathers, Mathers's a spirit. Mathers would shade his eyes with his hands and gaze at the empty chair at the opposite corner of the board before moving his partner's piece.

Even in a world where violence has become the norm of civilized behaviour, it was amiably fantastic to read in a recent Chinese novel that patriots in Hong Kong had been making bombs out of kettles and watermelons; and one can hardly regard as any less fantastic the world of Irish Republic politics into which Yeats was plunged:

Maud Gonne had visited the Boer agent, Dr Leyds, in Brussels in order to place before him a design for sending a British troopship to the bottom by concealing in the bunkers bombs disguised as lumps of coal.

Leyds was reluctant to adopt an unrecognized method of warfare, because he feared the effect upon English liberal sentiment, but he had yielded to the entreaties of the fair envoy to the extent of offering to place £2000 at her disposal for unspecified revolutionary action in Ireland.

The sum had been intercepted by a gentleman who, calling upon Leyds after Maud Gonne had left Brussels, declared that he was her friend and that it was undesirable for a lady to be mixed in such dangerous transactions. It was suspected . . . that the gentleman was the mad rogue, as Yeats now called O'Donnell.

Maud Gonne was in despair. After enduring so many vicissitudes—including an attempt of Clemenceau to poison her—all the political credit she had built up in France lay in ruins. . . . Yeats comforted her as best he could. Then the I.R.B. got wind of the affair and some young hotheads decided that O'Donnell's crime could be expiated only by death.

Maud Gonne felt a scruple about being privy to the removal of an enemy by means which she would not employ herself, and for some weeks Yeats lived the life of a hero of a sensational novel, pleading with her for their enemy at meetings of the I.R.B.

Their efforts were successful; O'Donnell escaped vengeance, and a few years later produced another lively pamphlet against the Yeatsian literature.

Yeats had reason to write that life seemed like "an heroic dream"!

Though the phrase summed up the whole of his life it referred specifically to Maud Gonne. More than anything else it was his prolonged, hopeless devotion to that proud, cold, fanatical beauty, "a woman Homer sung", that wrapped his days in "the cold snows of a dream".

He met Maud Gonne when he was 23, and first proposed marriage to her three years later. He was still asking her to marry him in 1917, when he was 52.

His devotion, Yeats told Lady Gregory, "might as well have been offered to an image in a milliner's shop or to a statue in a museum".

What Yeats took with him when he emerged from the mists of "the tragic generation", Hone suggests, was his cloak: that is, the conscious pose of the poet, which, though it is out of fashion today and though it had the inevitable defects of artificiality, gave him one of his greatest virtues as a writer, his respect for his own art, reflected in an invariable dignity of style. It is probable that Yeats also took with him from the nineties the notion that a Broken Heart was a highly desirable possession for a poet.

Baudelaire had had his opium; Symons had his ladies of the street; Dowson and Johnson had their drink; Wilde was notoriously the Stricken Deer; and Yeats, until in middle life he began to be annoyed with it, had his Broken Heart. It was his wound, his weakness: it very nearly became his vice.

Somebody who believed the Broken Heart was all pose, said that Yeats had a cold heart and a warm mind. Hone, rightly disagreeing, points out that it is impossible with Yeats (as with everyone else) to say where pose ends and reality begins. A man is not part pose and part reality, but an inextricable blending of pose and reality. Yeats's love for Maud Gonne was unquestionably sincere. On what was apparently the only occasion in his early manhood when his devotion was temporarily chilled so that he could look favourably upon another woman ("Diana Vernon") the spectre of Maud Gonne rose up to frustrate an elopement. That was not pose: Yeats was in love with Maud Gonne.



In 1903, when Yeats was 38, Maud Gonne married John MacBride, who had led the Irish Brigade with the Boers. Throughout the duration of the marriage (which turned out a failure) Yeats remained devoted. A liaison with "an unmarried lady past her first youth", began when the poet was 45, was "carried on without great conviction on either side", and died quickly when Yeats came—erroneously—to suspect that he had been "ensnared by a huntress". Maud Gonne remained his idol, and in 1917, when her husband died, he repeated his proposals of marriage.

It was an extraordinary year for Yeats. When Maud Gonne rejected him yet again, he proposed to her daughter Iseult. Iseult also having declined—

How could she mate with fifty years that was so wildly bred?  
Let the cage bird and the cage bird mate and the wild bird mate  
in the wild—

the poet married an Englishwoman, Miss Hyde-Lees, whom he found "a perfect wife, kind, wise and unselfish". Three years earlier, in the prelude to *Responsibilities*, he had addressed his ancestors:

Pardon that for a barren passion's sake  
Although I have come close on forty-nine,  
I have no child, I have nothing but a book,  
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

The "barren passion", he had come to realize, was destroying his life. It was also harming his work; or, more accurately, he had worked out to the full the literary value of a broken heart, and, if he were to continue writing without repetition, he needed adventure. The image of Maud Gonne haunted him to the end of his life; but he was free from her; he could see her clearly, detachedly, write about her with new strength. The typical early poem to Maud Gonne was:

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,

I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

The "key" of his maturity was indignation as well as love—anger, even hatred:

Have I not seen the loveliest woman born  
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,  
Because of her opinionated mind  
Barter that horn and every good  
By quiet natures understood  
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

Yeats would still have been a considerable poet if he had never broken free from Maud Gonne. No change of fashion can destroy the beauty of the early poems on the lost-love theme. But if he had not broken free he would never have been so great a poet as he is. For the full statement, the complete understanding of life that gives his later poems their Shakespearean richness, he had to emerge from his dreams, welcome the "blood and mire", discover action and sensuality.

Now that my ladder's gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

Of all the "dreams" in which he had moved the dream of Maud Gonne was the most dangerous, because, feeling it the most strongly, he came the nearest to surrendering to it.

Any one of the great influences upon Yeats's life and art could have been fatal to both. The decadence of the nineties could have destroyed him as it destroyed Dowson and Johnson and Wilde. His dabbling in magic and mysticism set him on the road to frenzy, for the process of mysticism—the opening of the mind to a flood of images from the subconscious, formless, incoherent and unintelligible—inevitably destroys the poetic process, the essence of which is control, the isolation and clarification of the image. Had

Yeats surrendered to his mysticism as Blake did, his work would have been a collection of monstrosities like his solitary "prophetic book", *A Vision*.

Irish politics, too, might well have destroyed him. Maud Gonne tried again and again to persuade him to write propaganda plays, and, though he was above that vulgarity, he wasted much time and energy on what he afterwards came to realize was "a surrender to the artist's greatest evil, creation without toil".

Some inner balance preserved him from surrendering irrevocably to any of his dreams. He used them for his poetry and passed on. He came to regard the poetic process as "a continual setting in order of the disorder of one's own mind". Hone quotes with approval Dr Bronowski's summing-up:

Yeats stands against the line of poets whose ideal was poetry. And he stands away from the little poets of the nineteenth century who tried to fit poetry to a social use. He is a poet of great living and of the senses. Yeats is poet enough to stand against poetry.

The secret of his life is detachment. He was not *finally* involved in any of his dreams. He could look detachedly on the Rhymers' Club, detachedly on mysticism, detachedly on politics, detachedly (after bitter struggle) on Maud Gonne, detachedly at the end on life itself, writing for his epitaph:

Draw rein, draw breath,  
Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!

Maud Gonne became "a woman Homer sung"; out of politics, "A terrible beauty is born"; life was an heroic dream, a great spectacle, a dance from which his deepest integrity stood apart even while he was moving to its rhythms and bewildered by its music.

## IRRECONCILABLE INDIA

E. M. FORSTER'S *A Passage to India*, first published twenty years ago, becomes more topical every day:

"Clear out, clear out, I say. Why are we put to so much suffering? We used to blame you, now we blame ourselves, we grow wiser. Until England is in difficulties we keep silent, but in the next European war—aha! aha! Then is our time."

Though fascinating as a political study, the novel is, of course, primarily literature: a dramatization of the ultimate loneliness of the spirit of man, its struggle for communion with its fellows, its inevitable failure and its solitary exile under the great arch of the sky against whose immensity all creeds, all loves and all hates merge into the meaningless reverberation—*Boum . . . Boum!*—which Dr Aziz and Mrs Moore heard in the caves of Barabar. As when Fielding and the spinster Miss Quested come to an understanding, brief communion is possible between spirit and spirit, but it is very brief, and the momentary contact makes even more frightening the mystery of the surrounding eternity. Human beings whose minds meet for a moment beneath the immensity of the sky are, in Forster's unforgettable symbol, "dwarfs shaking hands".

When a writer of Forster's calibre, perceiving that racial differences are a convenient dramatization of the isolation of any man from his fellows, sets out to paint the clash between the English mind and the Indian, it is natural that the picture should be more vivid and more true than any that could be offered by a publicist with a political axe to grind. Free from ideological rancour, Forster is searching for human truth. He is as free from prejudice as it is reasonable to ask of any writer, that is, ninety-nine per cent free.

For he is, one feels, a little on the side of the Moslem throughout. The whole book is written in a spirit of detached irony; Dr Aziz and the Hindu characters are portrayed as honestly, satirized as amusingly as are the Subaltern, the Spinster, and those typical Anglo-Indians the Turtons and the Burtons. But the quality of the irony is not always the same; it is acid when he deals with the English, sympathetic when he deals with Aziz.

There is some injustice to the English, perhaps, in the whole scheme of the book. Reduced to its fundamentals *A Passage to India* is the story of how Dr Aziz and Fielding tried to be friends and, because complete and lasting sympathy between spirit and spirit is impossible, failed. But, from the political viewpoint, the story is that a Moslem and an Englishman tried to be friends and, because "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet", failed. And they fail in this book largely because of a mistake made by Miss Quested, the Turtons and the Burtons—the English ruling class.

The great drama of the book—the clash between East and West and the crisis in the friendship of Aziz and Fielding—comes when Miss Quested accuses Aziz of having assaulted her in the cave of Barabar. On the spinster's word, without real evidence, Aziz is immediately arrested and thrown into prison; every white man with the exception of Fielding, who believes in his friend's innocence, loses his head completely in an ebullition of chivalry, indignation and racial solidarity; every white woman becomes a fury clamouring for the Moslem's blood; men and women, the English are united in the determination that "justice must be done"—meaning that Aziz must be found guilty. Hindu and Moslem put their private feud aside to support the Indian against the English. There are riots, ugly incidents, every word the English say among themselves is treasured against them by their hostile servants; dark man and "pinko-grey" are on the verge of war. The English overawe and intimidate the nervous Hindu magistrate; it seems certain that Aziz—for, of course, he is innocent: suffering from

the sun and her spinsterhood, Miss Quested has had a hallucination—will be unjustly convicted. Then comes the magnificent fiasco when, released from her hallucination, Miss Quested admits that she has made a mistake and the English—though they will never acknowledge it and Aziz to the end of his days remains under police surveillance—are proved to have been the dupes of racial hysteria, unjust and foolish. The outcries of the women, the solemn chivalry of the men, the adolescent belligerence of the Subaltern, the ostracizing of Fielding—all these are shown to have been supremely silly.

To the reader, knowing all along with Aziz, Fielding and the author that the Moslem is innocent, the activities of the English appear ridiculous throughout. And so, within the framework of the novel, they are. The satire is superbly done. Nothing could be funnier than the Turtons and the Burtons at the club.

But supposing, as could well enough have happened in real life, that Aziz were guilty. The chivalry of the English, their banding together at the club, their determination to see the criminal brought to trial no matter what mobs howled against them—nothing that they do would look silly then. The Turtons and the Burtons would look heroic, Fielding a sentimentalist.

Has Forster, from the political viewpoint, slipped into injustice here? If the arrest of Aziz carries the implication that the English are always in the wrong in their dealings with the natives, the novelist has certainly done his own people an injustice. But perhaps the correct political interpretation is that the English—symbolically speaking—are always wrong because they don't, as Fielding did, take the trouble to know the hearts and minds and souls of the Indians. If the Turtons and the Burtons had known Aziz as they should have, perhaps Forster means to say, they could never have suspected him of the crime.

Had Aziz merely fallen out with the Turtons and the Burtons it might be easy to find the answer to the Indian problem. But the "agony" of the book is that Aziz and

Fielding cannot maintain their friendship, and that is a political statement as well as a spiritual one. An Englishman, however liberal, cannot, in Forster's view, remain permanently in harmony with an Indian; racial differences, with centuries of tradition behind them, are real differences, and cannot be surmounted.

It is not "justice" Aziz wants. On the whole, as Forster admits in his cold honesty, he gets justice from the Turtons and the Burtons. But it is not enough. Under Fielding's tutelage Miss Quested writes a letter of apology to Aziz. "Our letter is a failure," says Fielding,

"for a simple reason which we had better face: you have no real affection for Aziz, or Indians generally."

She assented.

"The first time I saw you you were wanting to see India, not Indians, and it occurred to me: Ah, that won't take us far. Indians know whether they are liked or not—they cannot be fooled here. Justice never satisfies them, and that is why the British Empire rests on sand."

One sees the English dispensing justice, steering an honest path through the multitudinous complexity of Indian affairs:

Mohurram was approaching, and as usual the Chandrapore Mohammedans were building paper towers of a size too large to pass under the branches of a certain peepul-tree. One knew what happened next: the tower stuck, a Mohammedan climbed up the peepul and cut the branch off, the Hindus protested, there was a religious riot, and Heaven knew what, with perhaps the troops sent for. There had been deputations and conciliation committees under the auspices of Turton, and all the normal work of Chandrapore had been hung up. Should the procession take another route, or should the towers be shorter? The Mohammedans offered the former, the Hindus insisted on the latter. The collector had favoured the Hindus, until he suspected that they had artificially bent the tree nearer the ground. They said it sagged naturally. Measurements, plans, an official visit to the spot. But Ronny had not disliked his day, for it proved that the British were necessary to India; there would certainly have been bloodshed without them.

And the British, Forster implies, may indeed be neces-

sary. Under British influence, Professor Godbole set out with enthusiasm to found the King-Emperor High School; in a native State he could never raise quite enough energy actually to get the school going. Dr Aziz, a good medical man under the British, became a tribal medicine-man in the native State to which he retired after the trial. Away from the English, both Hindu and Moslem were hopelessly inefficient.

Fielding had "no further use for politeness," he said, meaning that the British Empire really can't be abolished because it's rude. Aziz retorted: "Very well, and we have no use for you," and glared at him with abstract hate. Fielding said: "Away from us Indians go to seed at once. Look at the King-Emperor High School! Look at you, forgetting your medicine and going back to charms."

Aziz knows this is true: yet the "abstract hate" persists: the British must go. When the Indian political associations meet to abuse the British, they know that their "unity" will disappear when their rulers disappear; yet the abstract hate persists: the British must go.

Hamidullah had called in on his way to a worrying committee of notables, nationalist in tendency, where Hindus, Moslems, two Sikhs, two Parsis, a Jain and a Native Christian tried to like one another more than came natural to them. As long as someone abused the English all went well, but nothing constructive had been achieved, and if the English were to leave India the committee would vanish also.

The root of the trouble, as Forster sees it, is simply that the English don't like the Indians and the Indians don't like the English. They are incompatibles. Both sides are responsible for this antipathy. There are the Turtons and the Burtons, and the women of the Turtons and the Burtons (an odd problem of Empire!):

He had discovered that it was possible to keep in with Indians and Englishmen, but that he who would keep in with Englishwomen must drop the Indians. The two wouldn't combine. Useless to blame either party, useless to blame them for blaming one another. It was just so, and one had to choose.



But Fielding himself, ultimately, cannot get on with the Indians. He and Aziz must part. And that is partly because Fielding inevitably reverts to the English type, partly because Aziz inevitably reverts to the Indian type. Once—at the time of the trial—Fielding has defied his own kind and stood as the Indian's champion; but—

He had thrown in his lot with Anglo-India by marrying a countrywoman, and he was acquiring some of its limitations, and already felt surprise at his own past heroism. Would he today defy all his own people for the sake of a stray Indian? Aziz was a memento, a trophy, they were proud of each other, yet they must inevitably part.

In fact, he can't be bothered any longer with the Moslem. Once, for friendship, personal and national, he would make the great gesture; but not again and again. That is asking too much of human nature: and Aziz will inevitably get into trouble again and again, whenever he mingles with the English. The whole crazy expedition to the caves, the cause of all the trouble, came from the Moslem's foolish invitation to Mrs Moore and Miss Quested to visit him at his house when he knew very well that he could not really, for shame, entertain them at that squalid and fly-thronged hovel; had he not quarrelled with the guide, he would never have been left alone with Miss Quested; had he not forgotten to look after her and had he not lied about his neglect to save his face, she would never have been left alone to suffer her hallucination; had he not continued to lie, the circumstances would never have looked so damning. The Turtons and the Burtons were not the only ones at fault in the affair of the caves. His evasiveness poisons his relations even with Fielding; his absurd suspicions, born of racial mistrust, make lasting friendship between them impossible:

Aziz did not believe his own suspicions—better if he had, for then he would have denounced and cleared the situation up. Suspicion and belief could exist in his mind side by side. They sprang from different sources, and need never intermingle. Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumor, a mental malady, that makes

him self-conscious and unfriendly suddenly; he trusts and mistrusts at the same time in a way that the Westerner cannot comprehend. It is his demon, as the Westerner's is hypocrisy.

Aziz is not all India, and he knows it. He has not been fair to Fielding, and he knows it. Yet he can persuade himself that he is all India, and with a fanaticism in which reason has no part whatever he solves all his problems by crying for the expulsion of the English—for the destruction of the only element of sanity, as Westerners understand it, in all his troubled country:

He couldn't quite fit in Afghans at Mau, and, finding he was in a corner, made his horse rear again until he remembered that he had, or ought to have, a motherland. Then he shouted: "India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah for India! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"India a nation!" Fielding taunts him. "She whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps!"

Aziz in an awful rage danced this way and that, not knowing what to do, and cried: "Down with the English, anyhow. That's certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most."

When the British have gone, says Aziz (anticipating Gandhi), he is perfectly willing to be friends with them. Why not be friends now? Fielding asks reasonably. . . .

But the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the gaol, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the guest-house that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices: "No, not yet," and the sky said: "No, not there."

That is Forster's last word on the subject—a magnificent piece of symbolical writing. The horses of destiny swerve apart. It would be asking too much of a novelist to take this

book as the final political truth about India. But in a time when the perfectionists rearrange the world to their liking with all the ease of the daring young man on the flying trapeze, it is worth reading, or re-reading to learn that the problem of India was not an easy one for Fielding, for Aziz or for the Turtons, the Burtons and their ladies.

## A. G. STEPHENS

A COMMUNITY that endures a contemptible law is itself contemptible. . . . Indecency, or even obscenity, simply cannot enter into the artistic question. Art has nothing to do with decency; it is a Peter's sheet in which there is nothing common or unclean. A picture of a saint has no more artistic merit, because it is a picture of a saint, than a vile Pompeiian fresco; and it may have less. Countless pictures of saints have perished, and some Pompeiian frescoes are immortal—not because of subject, but because of art.

It could have been said yesterday about the banning of *Ulysses* or *Redheap*. It was said by A. G. Stephens in his *Bookfellow* twenty years ago. And so Vance Palmer's claim that Stephens's writings are still fresh is obviously true. They are, in fact, amazingly fresh; amazingly, because the pieces of literary criticism Mr Palmer has strung together for *A. G. Stephens; His Life and Work* are not elaborate essays in which the crystallization of a philosophy of letters might be expected to stand the test of time, but mainly snippings and scraps from the first *Bulletin* Red Pages—week-by-week reviews and jottings which, if they were the ordinary stuff of journalism, would reek of the decay of the files.

Even last week's newspaper articles (like last minute's broadcast talk) will seldom bear reprinting. But here, still fresh and still—on the whole—valid criticism, is what A.G.S. said of Australian short stories in a Red Page of 1897:

Australian writers run too much to the easy, detached, realistic sketch—not too much if it be considered that they are young and learning, but too much if they are judged without reference to local considerations, as artists merely.

And again (apparently, by calling for greater realism, contradicting himself; but not really doing so, for the true short story takes its shape somewhere between the laxity

of the sketch and the slickness of the artificial "magazine story"):

Too much is ephemeral. The reason is: Becke's failure in constructive power. He wrote some excellent short stories, still excellent short stories; but they are all episodes. That is, detached from the main current of life. Island scenes and people are shown in a wonderful series of moving pictures; but, when the pictures stop, there is only a blank screen. They are always outside the reader, virtually set apart in another existence. The only lasting stories are those that get inside the reader, making him feel that they are a part of himself which hitherto he has not known, not recognized.

Again (a criticism meant for Lawson but still applicable to any short-story writer who keeps his eye on the immediate objective of newspaper publication instead of on the only objective for which it is really worth while writing short stories—book publication):

A reader of Lawson's work is continually setting out for short journeys all round the compass. Perhaps it was expedient to begin publication in the way of journalism; but it was not necessary to end there. The spectacle of Lawson's talent, contrasted with his performance, offers a useful lesson to many writers wasting their strength in periodical publication. Lawson has achieved himself, but he has not justified himself.

When it came to books, Stephens knew what he was talking about; that simple fact, making him a critic instead of merely a reviewer, is what made his criticism respected in his time and keeps it alive today. He had read the great books of the past, prose and poetry alike, and on them he based his standards. It was not enough for him that a book should be an entertaining (or otherwise) piece of current literature, "something to read"; it had to be considered as a work of art, standing or falling by comparison with the masterpieces of the world's literature; or with what A.G.S. considered the world's masterpieces. (Vance Palmer notes that his preference in poetry was for the lyric.)

*Robbery Under Arms* was a good novel, yes; but how did it compare with the Scott novels from which he knew it was derived? Fairly well:

If *For the Term of His Natural Life* is the better piece of literature, *Robbery Under Arms* is the better Australian romance. Thomas Browne had not Marcus Clarke's literary faculty, but he had a remarkable knowledge of the Australian life and character of his epoch, and he followed faithfully Sir Walter Scott's advice to observe and copy the fact. Scott was to a considerable extent Browne's model as a romantic writer; and his writing name of "Boldrewood" was taken from *Marmion*.

And so, "the Australian value of this book" was that "perhaps seven-tenths of it is Australian truth". Its value as literature—justly and precisely—was that it amounted to a pretty good application of Scott's method to the Australian scene; marred by the overwriting of the hero, redeemed by the realism of the minor characters.

It wasn't that Stephens couldn't praise. He knew that *Such Is Life* was good, and persuaded the *Bulletin* to publish it. *My Brilliant Career* won a favourable notice. Louis Stone's *Jonah*, savagely attacked elsewhere in its day but still immensely readable for its story alone and growing more and more valuable for its pictures of the vanished Sydney of the "pushes", "exhibited in masterly fashion the Sydney types we know and esteem highly". "With one book Mr Stone has put himself in the front rank of Australian authorship." But it was always guarded praise: there was a wealth of cautious qualification in that phrase "*Australian* authorship", or in the summing up of *Such Is Life* as "an Australian classic or near-classic". *Jonah* wasn't even to stand in the front rank of Australian novels without an analysis of its faults to temper the praise of its merits:

We have praised two-thirds of the book; the remainder is often as good in essence, but it is not an integral part of the book. Structurally *Jonah* is equivalent to "two rooms and a skillion", and the skillion is only a lean-to. The hunchback Jonah, greatly conceived, remains mis-shapen in fiction and in fact; he typifies the book he entitles. He grows beyond his creator's power to shape and guide, and his final tragedy is merely sketched, not shown and realized.

As with the novelists, so with the poets. Adam Lindsay Gordon? Well, yes; Gordon had many merits: "In the end

we love him for transfusing life; his poetry is a man's heart beating." But:

Australian popularity of Gordon is naturally accounted. He adapts Scott and Aytoun and Lockhart, Byron and Macaulay and Tennyson, Whyte-Melville and the Brownings—with doubtless other writers of his epoch—and weaves their ideas, their measures, and sometimes their phrases, altered by his own mind and coloured by his experience, into poetry for people who have never known the sources of his poetry. From the adored Byron of his boyhood to the beloved Swinburne of his manhood, Gordon's work is imitative. So he becomes a translated classic of the Bush.

And, again, Gordon was not allowed to be a classic of the Bush without having his qualifications as such assessed: "On the high path, Gordon's poetry is not poetical. . . . His poetry is intellectually obvious. . . . Gordon called some of his verses 'bush ballads', but there is hardly a hint of the ballad spirit in any of them. Your true balladist is no introspective pessimist; and then Gordon had too much culture, too many of the rhymester's airs and graces ever to be natural—and a 'ballad' which does not spring spontaneously from the soil has no right to the title."

It may seem that Stephens's attitude to the Australian writer was niggardly, carping; that he asked too much. But—in general—that is not so. To have two standards of criticism, one for European literature and another, much lower, for Australian books, would be insulting to Australian authorship as a whole; to relate Australian books to the stream of world literature, however they may suffer by the comparison, honours the author as well as doing him justice.

In particular instances it is true, however, that Stephens was overcautious. He loved Shaw Neilson's lyrics; but:

A poet means to me Shelley, Verlaine, and their kindred. The others I call verse-writers merely; they cannot give me the big emotion. I do not believe in cheapening the price of laurels. Even to Miss Jessie Mackay and Mr Shaw Neilson, I dislike applying the great word poet. I prefer to say that they are poets in kind, or that they have written poetry, and thus make a distinction. For a

man can write poetry without being a poet in my Shelley sense. . . . Miss Mackay is a poet in a manner of speaking; but not in my manner of speaking, not sheer and clear of all qualifications and reservations.

If Stephens had been boggling over "major poet"—which implies a great mass of work—his caution would be understandable. But it was over-severe to deny the laurel of "poet" to Shaw Neilson.

In Stephens's defence, it has to be remembered that he was dealing with many of these writers while they were making their reputations; he was not summing up their full achievements. A reviewer, with a single new book before him, or even with the knowledge of two or three previous volumes, cannot say, "This man is a major writer"; the most he can say is "This is major writing, and, if the author can keep it up, he will be a major writer." That is why Stephens, aware of his virtues but hoping to cure him of his faults, seems persistently to underrate Lawson; it is one of the reasons that makes him in his too-showy art criticism select for attack Low, Lambert and Norman Lindsay. He saw the stories, poems, paintings and drawings as running streams of work, not as the lakes of achievement.

"Bulk!" he cried for; poem upon poem, novel upon novel, story upon story, painting piled upon painting. Some of the men he criticized, Lawson and Lindsay in particular, have certainly turned out a sufficient mass of work for major status. But his great plea and challenge to Australian writers as a whole is still the cry of today:

Some have succeeded in verse and prose; but neither in prose or verse have we had a great writer, woman or man. Many good—some fine—none great.

In verse the reason is plain: the work is too limited or too imperfect.

Bulk counts in one's impression of greatness, even if some of the bulk is unworthy. It is true that poetic rank can be fixed by a stanza, perhaps even by a line; but place in the rank is fixed by the total weight of performance.



## A LETTER TO SHAKESPEARE

MR WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

Sir,

You are no doubt aware, through your contacts with Tom Collins, Henry Lawson and "Banjo" Paterson, that there has been some attempt at the making of literature in this country; that in Collins we had a rare, humorous and fantastic personality, in Lawson genius, in Paterson a song of manliness and sunlight; and you are doubtless aware that out of the combination of these three—odd men out of the earth that conceived the platypus and the kangaroo, good mates and men whom the bush filled with courage or sardonic humour or a loneliness of the spirit like that of the deaf genius in Sydney, and men who rode horses with a laugh—an Australian Image has arisen, as distinct, as vigorous and as indestructible as that Image of England which you alone, by the unity of spirit underlying the incredible variety of your output, gave to the world four centuries ago.

Then, sir, knowing all about the importance of the Image, and taking (as doubtless you do, because in our earthy originality and vigour we have something in common with your Elizabethans) not a "serious" but a happy interest in Australian literature, you had better ask Angus and Robertson to send you that "novel" which is at once a unique refreshment of our literature and a remarkable clarification of the Australian Image.

*The Pea Pickers*, sir. *Pea Pickers*.

If you were a lesser man, one would have considerable diffidence in inviting you to read any Australian book. With infinite care and patience, we have all built up a truly colossal inferiority complex about our literature. And, nine times out of ten, with reason. Such and such a book we know is

"pretty good for Australia"; but we would blush to send it overseas; or, from time to happy time, more and more frequently of recent years, there is a novel good enough to jostle with the others in the great stream of competent, well-written near-masterpieces rushing from the presses of England and America to their short life and their long doom.

Yet we do not offer Henry Lawson apologetically to anyone; nor, within his limitations as a balladist, "Banjo". Certainly we do not suggest that Lawson's stories can for one moment compare with your mighty dramas: but he had genius, he had something of your astonishing "universality", he differed from you much in degree but not very much in kind.

Can we offer you an unknown writer's first "novel" with the same assurance with which one offers the established Australian classics? Can we say that Eve Langley, though she differs from you in stature (no writer is a giant on one book, only on the mass of a lifetime's work), does not differ in kind?

Critically, it would be a dangerous assertion; but it is also dangerous critically, and also damnable, to be afraid to assert that Australian literature has qualities of greatness; to hesitate to believe the plain evidence of one's own eyes, which report on *The Pea Pickers*: "Here is the most original contribution to Australian literature since Tom Collins wrote *Such Is Life*; here is a book which is certainly, as A. G. Stephens said cautiously of *Such Is Life*, 'an Australian classic'; here, further, is a book which has the qualities of permanent literature and which could take its place beside, say, Keats's letters, in Everyman's Library."

In paying such a high tribute to *The Pea Pickers* we are not, sir, bemused and befuddled by the pleasant smoke of a book still hot from the press. *The Pea Pickers* was first read in manuscript after Frank Dalby Davison, H. M. Green and Beatrice Davis had awarded it a first-equal place in the 1940 Prior Prize competition; and a meticulous second reading reinforces the conviction that Frank Davison was right when he said on the Red Page, "It has the dew on it. It

contributes something fresh to Australian literature. I think it will be cherished."

"It is going to be cherished?" you say doubtfully. "Then it must have humour. Has it Falstaff? Has it Caliban? I do not care to read the greatest book under the sun unless it has humour. I know Milton had none, and Wordsworth none, but I crave the gusto and comedy of life."

Sir, the most astonishing thing about this book is its simple, genuine, irresistible humorousness. We quote you in full the great comedy of the horse named Seldom-fed, so that, multiplying this incident by a hundred, you may realize just how much humour, and what good humour, there is in *The Pea Pickers*:

The days passed and the oranges down in Sullivan's orchard grew riper with the winter sun. We spread the news to Pricie-ole-man. A night was arranged. He was to come down from Porepunkah on his mare Seldom-fed, and meet us outside on the road.

On that night a thunderstorm of light and fury boomed and flashed above the stony fortress of the granite mountain far above. Ah, how tragic it was to look out on to that ancient moonlight and see the black rain sweeping over the grey stone, to be followed by the white grandeur of lightning which threw its twisted limbs over everything. The granite roared with thunder, and showers as terrible as the hour of death fled over us.

On the road outside the camp sat Pricie-ole-man on his mare Seldom-fed. Long and spare was she, as her name indicated, and a velvet winter coat covered her, but could not soften the sharp bones that stuck out everywhere from her frame. Whenever the lightning flashed, Seldom-fed pigrooted with a powerful upthrust of her bony legs.

We ["Steve" and "Blue", the girl pea-pickers whose adventures make the "novel"] were dressed in long coats and trousers and carried a sugerbag in which to put the oranges. Pricie-ole-man held Seldom-fed against the fence while Starving Steve and Breadless Blue mounted to go on a raid again. He flung himself on, in front of us; then away, pigrooting and puffing, we trod a noble measure down the white road as the whistling rain fell in the moonlight.

As we passed the railway crossing, we saw a figure leaning against the cattle-pit, chewing walnuts and tossing a restless hat from side to side on an unkempt head.

"Who's that?" said Pricie-ole-man, peering through the lightning and moonlight.

"It's the ghost of the cow that got dragged along by the train last week," I replied. "Poor beast, it was in full milk, too."

"Gee with!" exclaimed Charl. "Gor blarmie! What do you take me for? Did you really think I was the ghost of that cow? I bet you didn't!"

Charl was a shrewd fellow sometimes.

"You go one better than us, Charl. We give in."

"Where you going thith hour er night?" Charl cracked another walnut on the cattle-pit and laughed. "After more of Blackmoor'th appleth?"

"No, Sullivan's oranges this time. Hop on!"

"Bring her over to the potht, then. Way, now! Wee . . . there! Gee with, just let me get me foot on her boneth and I'll get on. Come over, yer cow! Hey, wait on!" Charl missed and sat down on the muddy road. "Come over 'ere. Edge 'er over to the fence, Pricie-ole-man!"

"Get off for a moment," said Pricie-ole-man, in that bluffing way of his, "and I'll give it to her. I'll take it out of her."

Dismounting, we squatted on the side of the road in the moonlight and lightning, while Pricie-ole-man gave it to her. Seldom-fed solemnly pigrooted up and down the road for ten minutes, and Charlie stood by, his various rags flying in the wind. What a ballet! The thunder drummed in the ranges, the lightning flashed blue and green and gold in the black sky, and on the green grass the bony old mare pirouetted with thin upstretched throat and feet raised to the heavens as though carrying on her hooves a tray of whisky and soda to Olympus.

At last, she stopped, and was drawn over to the fence. In order, we mounted. Blue behind Pricie-ole-man, Steve behind Blue and Charl behind Steve, cracking walnuts on Seldom-fed's thigh-bones and handing them around.

"'Ere you are, Thteve. Gee with, wait a moment, Theldom-fed!" The steed rose in another slow and solemn pigroot, and we rose with it. "Wait till I crack me nut, Theldom." Clonk! "'Ere you are Blue, give one to Pricie-ole-man."

Slowly, with a reverend grandeur, we moved along the road under the tragic battle of the night. And often Charl cried frantically and painfully, "Move forward! Move forward! I'm thitting on the bone!" It was the banshee wail that accompanied us on our march.

So you see, sir—and you will see again and again wher "Steve" polishes her gold tooth with brasso before going to tea with the Seventh Day Adventist, or when Rusty Organ is found reading the paper in the bath, or wher

Jim's socks are nailed to a tree under the legend "Humming-birds, small, rare, *Avismella Petersenia*, Gippsland, Victoria", or when the farmer makes Steve and Blue throw their clothes in the kerosene-tin to boil with the stolen pumpkin—you will see many times in comic incidents and many more times in the smile of a fantastic phrase that even in modern times the good books are not written for highbrows alone; that they can have something of your own great "common touch", and so something of your own universality.

Should you think, sir, that this author has sent her two heroines a-peapicking to mock at the hundreds of good Australian peapickers they encounter in Gippsland or in the mountains of New South Wales, you would do her a grave injustice. This is the charitable laughter of the gods, to whom mankind, besides being inexpressibly comic, is also inexpressibly dear. Have a look at some of the portraits in this enormous gallery of Australians, and observe how the author loves as she laughs:

Mia, our mother, was a Gippslander, first generation. She was a short, rugged little woman, as swarthy as a gipsy, with a crooked nose which she had broken into the grotesque soon after it was given to her, by crawling under a house and hitting it on a block there. Her eyebrows were enormous and her laugh was windy, coming from somewhere down a chimney.

And one more (we would like to give you twenty, especially Dave having his fifth helping of pudding; and the enormous, passionate woman whose life was like the sarsaparilla, purple and sensuous out of the bare Australian earth)—one more to show you that there is tragedy as well as comedy among the portraits:

Mrs Wallaby greeted me like a daughter with a sly, kind smile.

"What the devil made you do all this crochet work?" I said disgustedly. "Fancy spending hours making this stuff!"

"Ah, well, Steve," she droned in her rich, deep, stuffy voice, "when my husband lay dying, yes, on the very night he died, I just sat here, minding him and crocheting. And for twelve months after he died I did nothing but crochet, crochet, crochet. Night and

day. The girls looked after the house. I just sat and did crochet. If I hadn't, I'd have gone mad."

As we hastened to assure you that the laughter was leavened with understanding, so do we now beg you, sir, not to misunderstand the quality of this pity. For sentimental pity, bred out of an absurd political perfectionism, has been the curse of Australian writing in recent years, and one of the most important things about *The Pea Pickers*, regarded as a possible influence on Australian literature, is that this author's "pity" is the tragic awareness of the true artist, free from political rancour, unperverted by ideologies, full of understanding for the troubles of humanity, but, in the last analysis, seeing all things as pure spectacle, actors and acts in the magnificent tragi-comedy of man upon earth.

Its humour and its generous detachment provide two means by which this book can exert a wholly beneficial influence on Australian writing. There is yet another quality, the most appealing of them all, which may influence future books. That is, its passionate love of Australia. Eye Langley loves her Australian characters for what they are, and she loves Australia, too, with a burning, mystical passion, not because it reminds her of some other country, not because she feels it ought to be loved, not for what it might become if this or that political panacea were put into operation, but simply and wholeheartedly for what it is.

"Banjo" and, of course, many others have loved this country just as easily and strongly as "Steve" does; but no one yet has expressed that love with more fire or more beauty than in "Steve's" passionate apostrophes:

I trod the hill of yellow grass; the land was veiled in the blue smoke of the still-burning bushfire that was wallowing in red seas from some desolate shore to the end of its journey. Above the dry grass the blue smoke wandered, and in the mystical twilight I cried, "O Patria Mia! Patria Mia!" and my naked brown feet kissed the dear earth of my Australia and my soul was pure with love of her . . . Divine was my love then, and with an uplifted heart I strode into the empty paddock and, alone there, crouched in the twilight on the earth I loved, began to work.

That was the way, was it not, you felt about England, "This precious stone, set in the silver sea"? It was to this passionate love of the Australian earth, associated with the people of that earth, that we referred when we said this book was "a remarkable clarification of the Australian Image". If any Australian wants to know what he is, of what earth and what people, the answer is "The earth and the people in Lawson, in Tom Collins, in 'Banjo' Paterson or between the covers of *The Pea Pickers*."

The particular bit of earth you loved, sir, was England; and generations of English patriots have been grateful to you; yet you passed beyond patriotism into the pure light of poetry, where there are no nations, only the gods. This book, too, blends the local and the universal. It is a pantheistic mysticism expressed in terms of the Australian earth, so that the black cockatoos "like flying aborigines" are at once intensely Australian and a flash of pure magic in the universe of poetry. Likewise the fox:

Sometimes, as we lay awake, listening to that hissing drip on the roof, to the solitary pattering among the yellow leaves, a fox laughed with a wild silvery note out in the bush, and we caught at each other and cried out at the primitive cry:

"Steve . . . the fox!"

"Ah, Blue! What wildness . . . what mirth and desolation in that laugh of his!"

We thought we saw him leaping the damp, rotten logs and roaming, full of blood-hunger, from tree to tree. The echoes of his cry awoke in us a desire, half-animal, half-spiritual, to be of the fox and the night.

This earth-worship, this homing of the spirit to the core of spirit in physical, even inanimate matter, is of such intensity that there is no thing on earth, however insignificant, in which it cannot perceive or kindle the fire of poetry; an old pack of cards, odds and ends of rubbish found in a deserted hut, old boots ("They are the flowers of the Australian forest. In some places you won't find a blade of grass, but you'll always pick up an old boot, as hard as a stone, its little round tin-metal-edged eyes gleaming malig-

nantly at their bad treatment") and even, fantastically, "the clean mossiness" on a peapicker's teeth and the footwarmers in a railway carriage: "The footwarmers felt like discarded hotwater bottles, a trifle indecent, from someone else's bed." Sir, it is something to have made a footwarmer immortal!

Even at this distance, sir, we have heard your opinion of proletarian prose. The short sentence, the flat statement, the nursery rhythm . . . we have heard thunder from heaven when Stein and Hemingway and their worse imitators cut their sentences to the bone and the Muse to the heart. Already you will have seen *The Pea Pickers* is magnificently written.

Terse and rich in dialogue, smoothly beautiful in landscape, the prose soars in those amazing apostrophes where Steve is raging at Time or crying out to the heavens, "When shall my two great desires, to be loved and to be famous, be satisfied?" into the "grand style". Sir, we are a sceptical, sardonic people and, like your audiences, would not accept the poet without the clown. This author, you will be glad to hear, is as passionately sardonic as she is, in high moods, ecstatic. When Steve is apart from her lover Macca, and sometimes when she is with him, she can think of him as Juliet thought of Romeo; but when, after bitter absence, she sought him again in Gippsland, she records with wry honesty:

"And you haven't seen Macca since we left, Eb?"

"No. Oh, yes, once. He came down here to a dance in the hall, and got drunk. He slept out all night and lost his false teeth. Next morning he was combing the bush everywhere looking for them." Eb roared at the memory.

Sir, this is a book about two girls peapicking in Gippsland and New South Wales. What love of words and skill with words, what love of Australian earth and Australian people and skill in painting them, what rich humour and what spiritual power have gone into it to make Literature of so slight a theme! And what living truth is there in its



depiction of the agony and delight of young love that the story of "Steve" and Macca should give unity and drama to the long, rambling picaresque narrative. And what deeper truth in the conception of mankind in the grip of Time, youth's struggle through disillusion to integrity, that this should be the real, most compelling "conflict" of the book and the last sentence, when Steve is left to face Time with her memories, dramatic as the clanging of a gong: "I opened the door and walked in. I was alone."

*The Pea Pickers*, sir—this is its final and greatest importance—aims high. At nothing less, indeed, than the creation of an immortal Image of Australia:

The railway crossing lay stark and bare across the road that led to the old homestead, and two great poplars, the poets of the land, shook their bare autumn branches, black and fine across the sky. Post-and-rail fences, as frail as Chinese writing, lay on each side of the trees against a reddening sky. We lived for things like that.

Over Evan's Range burnt the Dog-star, Sirius, with a scorching red, blue and green fire.

"That is my star," I said to Blue. There, walking slowly, with my eyes raised to it, I prophesied:

"Some day I shall write fully our life together, with its tragedy and comedy. But better than that. I shall write of Australia and bring lovers to her so that they shall fill the land with visionaries. For 'where there is no vision, the people perish'."

As you know better than anyone, sir, who put your whole heart into the terrifying adventure of genius, a book that flies so high is either a complete failure or a triumphant success. Nothing in between; Sydney or the Bush. We think *The Pea Pickers* is a success. Please read it. And tell Matthew Arnold that the purpose of high art is not "to see life steadily and to see it whole", but to see life passionately and to see it whole.

## A VERY JOYCE MORSEL

IF a writer, making the simplest and crudest of puns, writes "mat" for "mate", he conveys to the reader not two sounds but three: the sound of "mate", the sound of "mat" and a wavering overtone that is the sound of "mate" changing into "mat". It is as if a pianist, instead of striking a single note to represent "mate" or a single note to represent "mat", strikes both notes together, producing a sound that is both a blend of the originals and a reminiscence of each of them. And that, simplified to its essentials, is the method of the sound effects in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. The reader has to listen for the overtone, read between the puns.

Such a pun as "mate" and "mat" is not particularly confusing to the ear, yet it is sufficiently noticeable to cause surprise or laughter. Multiply that small shock enough times by a series of puns, forcing the ear to acknowledge three sounds for each one, three hundred for each hundred, and the effect becomes indescribably confusing. Most of the important words in *Finnegans Wake* are puns, and there are roughly 250,000 words. Anybody who tried to laugh 250,000 times reading one book would laugh himself into the madhouse, and what actually happens in reading the book is that after a time the mind simply refuses to endure the cannonade of puns any longer. Either one puts the book down, or else one reads it as nonsense, refusing to try to translate it into sense. Here is a paragraph, typical of what must be borne for 628 pages:

The fall (bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronnntonneronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohooohooordenenthurnuk!) of a once-wallstrait oldparr is retaled early in bed and later on life down through all christian minstrelsy. The great fall of the offwall entailed at such short notice the pftjschute of Finnegan, erse solid

man, that the humtyhillhead of humself promptly sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest of his tumptytumtoes: and their upturnpikepointandplace is at the knockout in the park where oranges have been laid to rust upon the green since devlinsfirst loved livvy.

Here, apart from such obvious puns as "erse" ("erst-while" and "Irish") and "rust" ("rest" and "rust-coloured"), are examples of most of the other purely verbal difficulties of *Finnegans Wake*. There is the invented word—the monstrous concoction in parentheses represents a thunderclap; the words run together; the foreign word—Joyce has drawn on fifty languages; the distorted word, such as "promptly"; and the use of rhyme, both vowel and consonant ("west" and "quest", "loved" and "livvy")—one of the worst of all confusions when the ear is attuned to prose rhythms.

These purely physical problems are almost enough to make the book unreadable, but the impact of the strange language on eye and ear is trifling compared with the effect of the triple meaning of each pun upon the understanding. Just as the "mat"- "mate" pun involves three sounds, it evokes three images—the image of "mate", the image of "mat" and the idea of "mate" as "mat", a metaphor signifying, perhaps, "downtrodden". And when the brain has agreed to grapple with three sounds for one, three meanings for each word, the reader's difficulties are still no more than hinted at.

Joyce works throughout by associations, both of sound and sense—as if from the sound "mat" one proceeded to "might" and "mutt" and "meet", and from the image "mat" to "carpet", "furniture", "house" or "Persia", or anything else that happened to come into one's thoughts. Finnegan is "humself" in the quotation above because, like Humpty Dumpty, he fell off a wall and, being dead, is not quite himself. For another example, here is "Tem" becoming "time" and "tom", and "When he pleased" becoming "Win and place"—both a pun and an association with "bet" (spelt "butt"): "But, of course, he could call himself Tem, too, if he had time to? You butt he could anytom. When he

pleased? Win and place." "Tem"—if it helps at all—is probably the river Thames.

Besides puns and associations, arbitrary or legitimate, there is a great deal of verbal trickery deliberately intended to be mystifying. An English critic has investigated the passage:

All the vitalmines is beginning to sozzle in chewn and the harmonies to clingcleangle, fudgem, kates and eaps and naboc and erics and oinnos on kingclud and xoxoxo and xuoxox xxoxoxoxxxx till I'm fustfed like fungstif. . . .

Joyce is describing somebody talking with his mouth full; the food as it is being masticated loses its shape, so he rearranges the letters of each word in sympathy; "steak" becomes "kates", "peas" and "bacon" are "eaps" and "naboc", "duckling" is "kingclud". So far, Joyce is playing fair. But the last few items on the menu have been chewed beyond the possibility of recognition; the words full of o's and x's represent "cabbage" and "boiled protestants" (potatoes), the x's standing for the consonants in those words and the o's for the vowels. It's ingenious, but unless it is explained it is a joke for the author only. And even when it is explained, it isn't particularly funny.

Is the whole book a joke at the public's expense? A long chapter in which Joyce gives a garbled "explanation" of the work, suggests that fundamentally it is intended seriously, but that with the serious intention goes both a joke and a snarl at the public, because Joyce knew that it could never be understood or appreciated, and realized, perhaps, that his attempt to make prose do the work of music was a failure. He states the book's purpose, the tremendous labour that went into it; he anticipates the public reaction to "his last public misappearance" and accepts with bitter humour the judgment of the "blond cop who thought it was ink was out of his depth but bright in the main":

With this double dye, brought to blood heat, gallic acid on iron ore, through the bowels of his misery, flashly, faithfully, nastily, appropriately, this Esuan Menschavik and the first till last alshemist wrote

over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body, till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all marryvoising moodmoulded cyclewheeling history (thereby, he said, reflecting from his own individual person life unlivable, transaccidentated through the slow fires of consciousness into a dividual chaos, perilous, potent, common to allflesh, human only, mortal), but with each word that would not pass away the squidself which he had squirtscreened from the crystalline world waned chagreenold and doriangrayer in its dudhud. This exists that isits after having been said we know. And dabal take dabnal. And the dal dabal dab aldanabal! So perhaps, agglaggagglomeratively asaspensing, after all and arklast fore arklyst on his last public misappearance, circling the square, for the deathfête of Saint Ignaceous poisonivy of the Fickle Crowd (hopon the sixth day of Hogsober, killim our king, layum low!) and brandishing his bellbearing stylo, the shining keyman of the wilds of change, if what is sauce for the zassy is souse for zazimas the blond cop who thought it was ink was out of his depth but bright in the main.

That it is "bright in the main" can't be disputed. The puns and distortions are so amazingly ingenious that essayists are likely to be quarrying it for many years. When he wishes to say "girl friend", because the girl of whom he speaks is very young and silly, the prose itself giggles—"gigirl frifriend"; a "merry Christmas", because Christmas is the time of rain and mud and because Christmas festivities are a crush and a mess, becomes a "muddy crushmess"; a singer whose sweet sounds are heard late and early sings "lute and airy".

For an example of words charged to the limit with suggestion one may take the invocation:

In the name of Annah the Allmaziful, the Everliving, the bringer of Plurabilities, haloed be her eve, her singtime sung, her rill be run, unhemmed as it is uneven.

"Annah" suggests "Allah" and the Mohammedan faith; "her singtime sung" and the rhythm of the concluding phrases suggested "Thy Kingdom Come"—the Lord's Prayer and the Christian religion; "Allmaziful" implies both "All-merciful" and Coleridge's "Five miles meandering with a mazy motion"—a reference to the "sacred river" and to all rivers;

"Plurabilities", the keyword to the sentence, suggests the diversity of life, and reminds the reader that Joyce's heroine is Anna Livia Plurabelle. Since Anna is at once a woman and all women, Dublin's river Liffey and all rivers, the sentence is so packed with meanings that to unravel each one and then to bring them into the synthesis Joyce has already achieved would take a book in itself.

The verbal dexterity of the Anna Livia Plurabelle section, which was published in pamphlet form some years ago, has been admired fairly widely. It does not really give as clear a picture of a river as Tennyson and Blunden have given without any distortion of the language, but the way Joyce can make his prose sway and swirl and chime in imitation of the Liffey is at least interesting:

Well, arundgiron in a waveney lyne aringarouma she pattered and swung and sidled, dribbling her boulder through narrowa mosses, the diliskydrear on our drier side and the vilde vetchvine agin us, curara here, careero there, not knowing which medway or weser to strike it, edereider, making chattahoochee all to her ain chichiu, ike Santa Claus at the cree of the pale and puny. . . .

The blond cop, however, remains the authority. When all the ingenuity is recognized, when one has admitted the Rabelaisian humour of the interludes, so nearly making sense, with which the narrative is garnished, the book's real purpose remains ink, remains out of the reader's depth, and the fault lies in the method, not in the reader. The attempt to paint in "one continuous present tense" all "marryvoising moodmoulded cycle wheeling history" doesn't work.

*Finnegans Wake* is a mirror in which the reflection of the history of Dublin is a symbol of the story of all mankind. Its sweep is from the Stone Age ("Ore you astone-aged?") to the present day. All peoples are evoked, their myths and religions, their languages, customs, cultures, their leading personalities—from the Stone Age's Mutt and Jeff to France's Napoleon and Dublin's James Joyce. Its characters are universals: Anna, as has been stated, is all rivers and all women, the feminine principle flowing through all

time, illuminating and (as Joyce shows by making the first sentence of the book a completion of the last) enclosing all life.

H. C. Earwicker, the leading male personality, is all men. He is Here Comes Everybody. One of Joyce's inexplicable "explanations" seems to suggest that Earwicker could represent "the word"—the male power of speech which is the coal that has fired the progress of human civilization. "Earwig" would be an appropriate personification of "word", and the struggle of man through the centuries might give some justification for Joyce's manipulation of the language—but the theory is no more than a shot in the dark. The usual explanation of the verbal circus is that it is "night-language", the dream-distorted mouthings of Earwicker as the story floats up into his sleeping brain.

Joyce took his notion of presenting a history of Dublin as an image of universal history from the philosophy of the seventeenth-century Neapolitan, Vico, who had in mind the writing of the story of Rome as "a timeless, ideal history". Finnegan was the hero of a ballad who died and came to life again at his own wake. Therefore Earwicker meditates on the unchanging river of the female principle, and the perpetual struggle, death and renewal of the male principle. Since it is quite impossible to follow this drama as an ordinary story in prose, the only way to accept it (and the way the sound effects seem to demand) is as a musical theme and variations—not the "music of the spheres", but the earthy voice of Dublin and the world we live in. And that is the final effect of *Finnegans Wake*—a vast, coarse, complicated music. Giving Joyce due credit for the magnitude of his conception, wouldn't one get almost exactly the same result from reading the *Encyclopædia Britannica* backwards?

## DUBLIN AND THE BUSH

JAMES JOYCE and Henry Lawson have so little in common that it seems straining criticism to relate one to the other. Yet the selection from *Ulysses* which T. S. Eliot has chosen for *Introducing James Joyce* reminds one that Joyce and Lawson, opposites in art, and living at opposite ends of the earth, once wrote the same story and, each in his own way, both made a masterpiece of it. The funeral of Dignam in *Ulysses* is the same story as Lawson's "The Union Buries Its Dead".

The correspondence goes much deeper than the obvious relationship in the fact that both stories describe a funeral. Underlying some differences in plot, there is a striking identity of purpose: Each writer has set out to make as stark a comment on death as he possibly could and each, in an identical spirit of sardonic realism, gives the picture of a man shoved away into a hole in the earth and forgotten while life goes on unperturbed.

In neither case are intimate personal relationships, which would modify by sentiment or human tragedy the story's ironic detachment, allowed any prominence. The man Lawson buries is an unknown wanderer of the outback; those whose reactions to the burial of Dignam are described in the extract from *Ulysses* are his male friends—boon companions and casual acquaintances. In neither case, again, is this exclusion of intimate relationships accidental. Justified perhaps by the fact that time would modify personal anguish into the indifference or impersonal awe of those who are merely spectators at the funeral; and justified in any case by the necessity of artistic selection to present any chosen image in its full force, both Lawson and Joyce have deliber-



ately excluded those personal emotions which would be irrelevant to the point they wished to make.

The effect aimed at in each case is the starkness of Greek tragedy. Death is presented as an affair of the gods, impersonal, a doom; and, awed by the spectacle, though indifferent to the fate of the dead man except in so far as it is a reminder of their own mortality, the "mourners" return to life with a relief which naturally expresses itself in a dive for the nearest bar.

A device in the chapter from *Ulysses* parallels Lawson's use of the anonymity of the corpse to stress the impersonality and the solitariness of death. Nothing is known of Lawson's wanderer; he met some men by a river, remarked that it was a fine day, and the next day they learned he had been drowned. Because they found a General Labourers' Union ticket in his pocket, they went to his funeral.

The procession numbered 15, 14 souls following the broken shell of a soul. Perhaps not one of the 14 possessed a soul any more than the corpse did—but that doesn't matter.

Four or five of the funeral, who were boarders at the pub, borrowed a trap which the landlord used to carry passengers to and from the railway station. They were strangers to us who were on foot, and we to them. We were all strangers to the corpse.

It was not possible in Joyce's novel for him to depict this utter solitariness—Dignam is followed to the grave by his friends—but he achieves something of Lawson's macabre image of the loneliness of the soul by making one of the "mourners" a stranger. There is a man in a mackintosh, whom nobody knows:

Now who is that lanky-looking galoot over there in the mackintosh? Now who is he I'd like to know? Now, I'd give a trifle to know who he is. Always someone turns up you never dreamt of. A fellow could live on his lonesome all his life. Yes, he could. Still, he'd have to get someone to sod him after he died, though he could dig his own grave. We all do.

And then, when the stranger has disappeared, one is reminded of the drover in Lawson's story who nearly came to the funeral but, the pub calling more strongly, didn't.

A horseman, who looked like a drover just returned from a big trip, dropped into our dusty wake and followed us a few hundred yards, dragging his packhorse behind him, but a friend made wild and demonstrative signals from an hotel verandah—hooking at the air in front with his right hand and jobbing his left thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the bar—so the drover hauled off and didn't catch up to us any more. He was a stranger to the entire show.

The drover is like a visitor from another planet, dropping in for a moment on human tragedy, at first mildly curious, then quickly indifferent. If one were searching for a symbolic meaning behind the casual interlude, one could conceive him as Lawson's image of the spirit of life: Life spares a glance for Death, then goes on living, unconcerned. The *Ulysses* stranger, a more mysterious gentleman who might be Death dropping in for a moment to look at his handiwork, gives, by his disappearance the same impression of the irrelevance of Death to the living:

—And tell us, Hynes said, do you know that fellow in the, fellow was over there in the . . . .

He looked around.

—Mackintosh. Yes, I saw him, Mr Bloom said. Where is he now?

—M'Intosh, Hynes said, scribbling. I don't know who he is. Is that his name?

He moved away, looking about him.

—No, Mr Bloom began, turning and stopping. I say, Hynes!

Didn't hear. What? Where has he disappeared to? Not a sign. Well, of all the. Has anybody here seen? Kay ee double ell. Become invisible. Good Lord, what became of him?

Hammering at the theme of life's fundamental indifference to death—the unimportance to the mass of men of the loss of any individual—the writers again use the same device when they present the reactions of people by the way-side to the *cortège* as it passes. Even more detached than the drover or Joyce's mysterious stranger, the spectators pay a nod to the funeral—remembering their own mortality—then go about their affairs. The moment the procession is out of sight, Lawson's drunken spectator, one feels, will be

much more interested in the problem of picking up his hat again than in the mysteries of the universe.

On the way to the cemetery we passed three shearers sitting on the shady side of a fence. One was drunk—very drunk. The other two covered their right ears with their hats, out of respect for the departed—whoever he might have been—and one of them kicked the drunk and muttered something to him.

He straightened himself up, stared, and reached helplessly for his hat, which he shoved half-off and then on again. Then he made a great effort to pull himself together and succeeded. He stood up, braced his back against the fence, knocked off his hat, and remorsefully placed his foot on it—to keep it off his head till the funeral passed.

Some of Joyce's spectators give the same brief salute, others not even so much: "On the curbstone before Jimmy Geary the sexton's, an old tramp sat, grumbling, emptying the dirt and stones out of his huge dustbrown yawning boot. After life's journey."

Both writers again emphasize their theme by pointing to human incongruities, the persistence of human emotions, even the most trivial, at high and solemn moments. Lawson comes out with his astonishing piece of venom against the fat publican whom he paints as toadying to the priest at the graveside by holding his hat over him throughout the ceremony, sheltering him from the sun—a powerful moment of invective which suggests irresistibly that it was recalled from personal experience. And Joyce has Bloom's absurd piece of soap—before starting on the funeral Bloom had bought a cake of soap and throughout the journey in the carriage he is secretly itching to shift it from his hip-pocket to some place where it won't obtrude on his person and his reflections.

And both writers, to reinforce their satirical aloofness, mock at the conventional ceremonies and trappings of mourning. "I have left out the wattle," says Lawson,

because it wasn't there. I have neglected to mention the heart-broken old mate, with his grizzled head bowed and great pearly drops streaming down his rugged cheeks. He was absent—he was

probably "out back". For similar reasons I have omitted reference to the suspicious moisture in the eyes of a bearded bush ruffian named Bill. Bill failed to turn up, and the only moisture was that which was induced by the heat. I have left out the "sad Australian sunset", because the sun was not going down at the time. The burial took place exactly at midday.

Joyce's satire is even more biting:

The carriage steered left for Finglas-road.

The stonecutter's yard on the right. Last lap. Crowded on the spit of land silent shapes appeared, white, sorrowful, holding out calm hands, knelt in grief, pointing. Fragments of shapes, hewn. In white silence: appealing. The best obtainable. Thos. H. Dennany, monumental builder and sculptor.

Passed.

So strikingly similar in the fundamentals of their technique, and so identical in their ultimate effect, these two stories are no less strikingly different in all that is not fundamental, setting and method. So long as the author has genuine talent, *any* literary theory can be made to work; and these stories are a good illustration of the fact. What's astonishing about Lawson's story is how much is left out; how in such stark outline, with so few details, with such a minimum of comment, in such a plain, arid style, he has been able to convey so much: a life's philosophy and a complete analysis of the most profound mysteries of life and death done in three and a half pages in his collected *Prose Works*. What's astonishing about Joyce's story is how much is crammed in; how on a theme as essentially simple as Lawson's he has painted so broadly and so richly, worked in so many details, commented to the maximum, elaborated his narrative with such complexities and ingenuities of style; and how these thirty-four pages of *Ulysses*, so intricate and so profound, nevertheless present the main theme so clearly and simply as to make the extract no less a model of form, no less inevitable and economical than Lawson's treatment of the same *motif* in a tenth the space.

Curiously, it is Lawson who appears the more "modern" of the two. That bare, harsh style, that colloquial language,

that "toughness" of the characters, that sketchiness of form—all might have derived from Hemingway, instead of preceding him by many years. If it is "modern" art to appear artless; to achieve all effects casually and apparently by accident; to create without effort; to turn one's back on the great tradition of English prose, with all its artifices of rhythm and diction in favour of what looks like a slovenly naturalness, Lawson in this story is as modern as a writer could be. Nor, in this case, would one quarrel with his modernness. The story succeeds. It is unforgettable. That is all that matters. And it succeeds because of its poverty, rather than in spite of it. It is a stark theme and a stark setting Lawson wishes to convey; and nothing could suit his purpose better than the stark manner he has adopted. Against his style, as against the spectators, the image of doom stands out in a clarity all the more dramatic for the casualness of both.

And yet exactly the same effect can be achieved, Joyce demonstrates, by the opposite method; by the piling of detail upon detail, comment upon comment, mass upon mass. Lawson's only glances aside as the procession moves to the cemetery are at the drover and the drunk. But the riders in Joyce's carriage meditate as they travel upon every possible aspect of death. Bloom reads the notices in the papers, and reflects:

Callan, Coleman, Dignam, Fawcett, Lowry, Naumann, Peake, what Peake is that? is it the chap was in Crosbie and Alleyne's? no, Sexton, Urbright. Inked characters fast fading on the frayed breaking paper. Thanks to Little Flower. Sadly missed. To the inexpressible grief of his. Aged 88 after a long and tedious illness. Month's mind Quinlan.

It is now a month since dear Henry fled  
To his home up above in the sky  
While his family weeps and mourns his loss  
Hoping some day to meet him on high.

They talk about suicide. About the merits of sudden death. About a child's funeral. About incurable diseases. About abbatoirs. The technique of undertaking. Murder, Hindu widows. Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort. Religious

ceremonies. Rats, decomposition—nothing is too grim for Joyce and every conceivable facet of his subject—always with the same ironic detachment—must be considered. There is even space for such an aside as this:

Besides how could you remember everybody? Eyes, walk, voice. Well, the voice, yes: gramophone. Have a gramophone in every grave or keep it in the house. After dinner on a Sunday. Put on poor old great-grandfather Kraahraark! Hellohellohelloamawfullyglad krark awfullygladaserragain hellohello amarawfkopthstth. Remind you of the voice like the photograph reminds you of the face.

And so if it's unmodern to show conscious technical effort in every sentence; to achieve all effects by deliberate ingenuity, writing no single word that appears casual or accidental; to create with infinite pains; to be aware every moment of the great tradition of English prose and to try one's hardest to improve on one's predecessors, labouring after rhythm, using a carefully selective diction and never for one moment falling into a lazy, colloquial naturalness, Joyce is, in this extract from *Ulysses*, as traditional as any writer has ever been.

One is tempted to think that Joyce wrote his books in the wrong order. *Finnegans Wake*, the vast, incomprehensible experiment with the dreaming mind (which is never likely to survive except as a curiosity or, like Burton's almost equally unreadable *Anatomy of Melancholy*, as a goldmine for essayists) should have been not the middle-aged man's last book but the young man's first. Then, while he was getting his breath, the strength and clarity of the *Dubliners* short stories and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* could have appeared, to be followed, as a final and impressive achievement, by *Ulysses*, blending the imaginative daring of *Finnegans Wake* with the strength and sanity of the stories.

Eliot's selections from all these books are excellent, but his introduction is disappointing. As in his introductions to *A Little Book of Modern Verse* and to Marianne Moore's poems and in nearly all his writings on Ezra Pound, Eliot is over-cautious: inclined to approve what is new because it

is new, but unwilling to say very much one way or the other for fear of being caught out by posterity. A critic of Eliot's eminence has almost a public duty to speak his mind plainly and be hanged to posterity. All the more so since literary critics of the eminence of a former Australian Customs Minister named Harrison (whose hair "stood on end") have not hesitated to appraise *Ulysses*, to disapprove of it, and to ban it.

## THEORIES OF LIFE AND ART

It will bring small comfort to those possessed by devils to learn from H. G. Baynes's *Mythology of the Soul* that, scientifically speaking, they are suffering from "a sudden activation of the archaic contents of the unconscious". For Baynes has written *Mythology of the Soul* to show how very nearly correct was the traditional diagnosis.

Oddly, considering the long "conflict" between science and religion, there is little in this latest proclamation of psycho-analysis incompatible with a sincere belief in religion. On the contrary, Baynes finds himself compelled to stress the "great danger of godlessness". Psycho-analysis has swung the full circle. Frazer's view of the great traditions as solar and vegetation myths is held inadequate; a path is found through and beyond the Freudians' maze of sex and the Oedipus complex. Baynes follows Jung to find a new mystery in man, a new dignity in the myths, a new validity in religion.

Quaintly again, as is the way of psycho-analysis, the sources from which Baynes's metaphysical speculations stream out are the weird, often unpleasant drawings of two of his patients, borderline schizophrenics. From his analysis of these baffling products of the unconscious emerges first a picture of the schizophrenic psyche; then of the normal psyche, of which the abnormal is merely an exaggeration, differing in degree, not in kind; and so of the normal self in relation to society (and particularly to a society dominated by the evil of Hitlerism), in relation to art and in relation to religion. One of the chief reasons for calling attention to the book is that it offers a way of approaching surrealist art; a basis both for understanding the paintings



that are being quarrelled about and for summing up their value as works of art or freaks of pathology.

In two paragraphs of his introduction Baynes gives the core of his (and Jung's) philosophy with admirable clarity:

Before the human mind had ever set itself to the labour of thought, the myth already flowed like a natural fountain out of the unconscious. Within this stream of living images the naïve mind is enfolded, as a trout is contained by the river. Like a fish to its native stream, the morale of a people also abides in their relation to their myth: when this is destroyed by intellectual sophistication or by other causes the virtue of a people departs.

With the individual it is the same: every man needs to be contained psychologically in a living stream. Call this stream, if you will, tradition; essentially it is the continuity of general psychic life in which the individual psyche is contained, and by which it is nourished. Often the stream of tradition seems to lose itself in still pools, as, for example, when the family or the clan or the church stagnates in ancient custom, forgetting to cherish the new forms which a living myth begets.

Most of the people who come to an analyst with serious purpose come because they have lost touch with, or been prised away from, their original background.

In other words, beneath the surface of individual consciousness, racial memories—shapes of terror, intuitions and emblems of delight—lie like fossils in geological strata. Beyond the Œdipus complex of Freud, the psyche yearns to the racial mother, the maternal archetype; to the terrifying ancestresses of the race to whose presence Mephisto led Faust; to benignant Mother Nature and Mother Earth. Co-existent with this dark feminine principle, the pull of the moon, there is in eternal balanced opposition the masculine principle of the sun, the germinating light that breaks the circle of sameness.

It is not enough, says Baynes, to explain that the mythological pattern of the old god and the young hero—Horus and Ra, Wotan and Siegfried—represents the setting and the rising sun. Rather, he submits, the image of the setting and rising sun was used by the primitive mind as an analogy for the dawn or increase of consciousness, the inspiration of

the archetypal hero. It is not enough, he says, to explain the descent of Persephone into hell as a symbol of the death of vegetation in the winter and its resurrection in the spring.

Rather it is the analogous reference, always at the back of men's minds, which connects the departure of the spirit of vegetation from the earth with the danger of dissociation in the psychic realm, when the soul absconds into the unconscious and consciousness is bereft of life and vigour.

One's first inevitable objection to theorizing of this sort is its abstraction. Against that, Baynes sets his patients' drawings, which are concrete proofs that the borderline schizophrenic does in fact depict the troubles of his soul in mythological imagery—sun, moon, hero, dragon, snake, flood: in imagery which can plausibly be interpreted in terms of familiar mythology. The archetypal symbols, used consciously by poets and artists down the centuries, are, on the evidence of the drawings, held in suspension in the unconscious of the ordinary man. To those who object that the theory is too complex, that the soul could not be imagined to contain this maze of ancestral memories, this morass of primordial images, Baynes answers that he is not asking anyone to conceive anything more elaborate than a butterfly's wing—that intricate, incredible design which is accepted as natural without question.

The forces at work in the unconscious Baynes simplifies to those of the "anima", the feminine healing principle, and the "renegade", the fatal tendency to surrender to the primordial darkness, peopled with images of terror. Only when the beneficent influence of the anima has reconciled the warring elements in the soul can the purpose of life (the purpose, Baynes says, of alchemy, science, psychoanalysis, art and religion) be fulfilled: "the detaching of the sacred flame of consciousness from entanglement with matter and flesh".

Schizophrenia occurs when some personal crisis stirs up the "archaic contents of the unconscious". The borderline case, who may or may not finally surrender to the renegade

within him, has lost touch with his fellow-men; lost touch, that is to say, with the myth in which they live. Apathy, "the deadliest peril of the soul", overcomes him; he is devoured by the torpid dragon, the Cyclops; he becomes one with the Circean swine. Fear of his emotional inadequacy, says Baynes, can drive him to frenzy; or, while he is still in the apathetic stage, he is fascinated by the unconscious, locked in a "self-destroying masochism". Above all, he begins to doubt the validity of his own nature.

Because of this statement of the schizophrenic's mentality, *The Mythology of the Soul* is one of the most satisfying bits of medical literature one could come across. Everyone likes to see his symptoms described in a medical textbook and to say, whether it's double pneumonia or housemaid's knee, "That's exactly what I've got." There's no trouble about that here, for Baynes does believe we've all "got it": schizophrenia, he believes, is the characteristic disease of the modern soul. If he were trying to foist a bodily ailment on everybody—appendicitis, say—his argument would be immediately suspect: but if "schizophrenic tendencies" is merely a short way of describing man's eternal tendency to relapse into apathy and atavism, the analysis is worth following.

Examples of the contemporary tendency to "doubt the validity of one's own nature" immediately spring to mind. Did not Gertrude Stein's heroine declare that she knew she was she only when her little dog recognised her; and did not T. S. Eliot declare, "We are the hollow men"?

Modern man, Baynes holds, has patently lost contact with his myth. Religion has lost much of its ancient authority; he feels that science is impotent before the forces of the unconscious.

The results of this severance are the same for the nation as for the individual: apathy, or surrender to the renegade. England, until the war restored the national myth, had taken the way of apathy. Germany, Baynes declares, surrendered to the renegade Hitler, personification of the atavistic enemy in the soul of the individual.

Considering the general state of Germany, he believes that the fanaticism of the Nazis is explicable as the over-compensation necessitated by a hidden doubt, and also that men surrender their wills to the renegade as to a tidal wave. A nice piece of scientific thinking applied to politics:

A misunderstanding, fraught with terrible political possibilities, obscures our appreciation of the complementary biological patterns which underlie the totalitarian and democratic forms of government. The former is based upon the pattern of the leader and the herd, which gregarious animals tend to adopt during migration, or when insecurity threatens. The break-up of the herd into families or relatively small groups when the breeding-ground is reached is equivalent to the natural communism of the food-gathering, indigenous tribes which forms the ground-plan of democracy. It is the crime of politics that these essentially relative patterns should be represented as absolute principles.

Baynes is less satisfying on art and letters than he is on legend and politics. Obviously a man of wide culture (who could have made a detailed analysis of the mysteries of the arts) he confines himself here to a sprinkling of interesting facts and stimulating suggestions. To give point to his assertion that certain historic places, charged with centuries of devotion, have the power to awaken and release racial memories, the archaic contents of the unconscious, he recalls the extraordinary vision at Stonehenge in J. C. Powys's *Glastonbury Romance*. In a further illustration—the well-known story of the two Englishwomen who visited the Trianon of Versailles and found themselves in the period of Marie Antoinette—he invites attack from the followers of J. W. Dunne, for Dunne believes that the two ladies walked literally into past time, whereas Baynes holds that what they saw were “images arising spontaneously from the unconscious”.

When he is discussing the activities of the anima, the case of “Fiona Macleod” gives him excellent material. Fiona, whose delicate, rather precious poetry and sensitive Gaelic romances were one of the thrills of the nineties, was more than the pen-name adopted by the journalist William Sharp;

she was a personality that mingled with and ultimately almost obliterated his own. To Baynes this is a clear case of possession by the anima.

Other items of literary interest are Baynes's analysis of *Dracula*, in which he declares that the vampire represents the dæmonic element of the unconscious and that Bram Stoker's story, written as a joke, is filled with the unconscious wisdom of the ages; his analysis of *Hamlet*—the familiar explanation of Hamlet's vacillation as arising out of the Œdipus complex; a comparison of *Moby Dick* and the Book of Job, Baynes agreeing with Nathaniel Hawthorne that Melville had written "an epic of megalomania", in which, aware, like Job, of the dynamic, reverse aspect of divinity, he had attempted to kill that divinity in the shape of the white whale; a study of Rima of *Green Mansions* as a beautiful symbolization of the anima; an exploration (on the lines of Peter Hopegood's essay in *Thirteen from Oahu*) of the Mother Goose nursery rhyme to its distant source where the good lady is the Primal Darkness, mother of the world; an analysis of Nijinsky's madness, suggesting that the dancer surrendered to the "atavistic attraction of the primordial image", to the archaic fantasy of the animal-god he created in his notorious "L'Après-midi d'un Faune".

Nowhere does Baynes attempt, as Freud did, a general theory of literature, but from these scattered references an important principle of criticism may be established. Because Freud's theories seemed to stop dead in sex—were widely, though not quite correctly, so interpreted—he has been the enemy of art and of criticism. Nothing could have been more damaging than the notion that the artist was merely giving expression to his personal—and basically sexual—frustrations; not so much because the theory induced a false sense of shame—though it did that, often enough—but because it belittled the whole endeavour and purpose of art. From Baynes's post-Jung philosophizings emerges the infinitely more acceptable theory that the artist—admittedly using or being used by the Freudian mechanism—is fundamentally concerned not with his own frustra-

tions, but with the myths that are the lifeblood of the race. His purpose is to give new life to the archetypal images, new validity to the eternal truths.

As in the case of literature, Baynes's opinions on painting are stated fragmentarily and need elucidating and elaborating in another book. Yet here, too, the scattered hints are illuminating. Reproducing two paintings by the surrealist Paul Klee, he shows how close these are to the products of the border-line schizophrenic. Analysing them as the depiction of a personal myth, the tortured soul's release in self-analysis, he declares categorically, "The casual, indiscriminate use of primary figures [mythological symbols] is schizophrenic atavism." The popularity of atavistic art in this age, he submits, is a phenomenon directly allied to the decay of the Western mythology on the one hand and the upsurge of Nazi barbarism on the other.

## THE RHINOCEROS'S MOTHER

"MR GALLAGHER," said Mr Shean, "did you ever have a mother?"

"Certainly not!" said Mr Gallagher.

"Ah," said Mr Shean. "Which of them have you been reading? Freud; that extremely well-written verse-play *The Way of an Eagle* recently broadcast by the A.B.C.; or W. H. Auden's *The Ascent of F6*?"

"I have attended an elegant performance of *The Ascent of F6* by an amateur group in Sydney," said Mr Gallagher. "I learned that men climb mountains because they have a mother-complex; that all heroic action springs from some such undignified source. Consequently I prefer to regard myself as a figment of the imagination; or possibly as an immortal who descended from the clouds disguised as a swan or a white bull. It has become inconsistent with human dignity to have been dandled upon a mother's lap."

"And yet," said Mr Shean, "a mother's love is a beautiful thing."

"Many a time," said Mr Gallagher, "watching a group of otherwise rational ladies crowding about some little monster in a pram, tickling its toes, poking their fingers into its stomach, fearsomely rolling their eyes at it and making shrill, incoherent noises, I have tried to think so."

"Nevertheless," said Mr Shean, "it is a beautiful and tender spectacle. It causes young fathers almost to give up beer. Poets have written verses about it."

"All the best baby-poetry," said Mr Gallagher, "has been written by slightly unbalanced bachelors. Swinburne, for instance. However, I will grant you that this phenomenon is completely natural and normal; even, in small doses at

infrequent intervals, charming; certainly not to be disapproved of."

"How sad," said Mr Shean, "to think that, while these cluckings and goings and ticklings are proceeding, the little innocent in the pram is inescapably developing a horrible big Freudian Mother-Complex that is going to haunt him for the rest of his days, making it impossible for one to attribute to him, when he climbs a mountain or explores the ice or the desert, or behaves with bravery in battle, any but the most ignoble motive. The hero of *The Ascent of F6*, as you are aware, climbs the mountain because he wishes, in symbolism, to kill a brother who has been his mother's favourite. Every baby, according to these post-Freudian gentlemen, falls in love with his mother and spends the rest of his life trying to slay his father or his brother or himself."

"In spite of having seen *The Ascent of F6*," said Mr Gallagher, "I think I had better admit to you that once upon a time—I can hardly credit it of myself—I was an ordinary baby. Do you know what I fell in love with when I was a baby?"

"No?" said Mr Shean.

"Coal. Absolutely adored it. A horrible, unnatural passion. They couldn't keep me away from it. I must have eaten a ton of the stuff."

"I don't doubt," said Mr Shean, "that that is responsible for your ambition to become an engine-driver."

"But I should hate to become an engine-driver," said Mr Gallagher. "A messy job, unpleasantly prophetic of hellfire."

"Do you claim," said Mr Shean, "that from this deplorable addiction to coal you have suffered no lasting ill-effects whatsoever?"

"Absolutely none!" said Mr Gallagher. "In my early youth I was occasionally known to whistle shrilly and run backwards with a clanking noise at unexpected moments. But in later youth and manhood I cannot recall a single eccentricity that could be related to coal."

"Then your theory is," said Mr Shean, "that even if all



our heroes are inflicted with a mother-complex in infancy they usually grow out of it?"

"Mr Shean," said Mr Gallagher, "even the rhinoceros had a mother."

"A thought," said Mr Shean, "of transcendental beauty."

"And upon the infantile rhinoceros," continued Mr Gallagher, "its mother lavished just that care and affection which the human mother lavishes upon her young."

"I don't think," said Mr Shean, "that the mother rhinoceros has ever been known to say, 'Mumsy's ickle-wickle precious-esshus'; yet the point is well taken."

"Then," said Mr Gallagher, "has or has not the baby rhinoceros, now grown to full and glorious manhood, got a mother-complex?"

"As a matter of fact," said Mr Shean, "most of the rhinoceroses of my acquaintance do look as if they are suffering from some secret sorrow. Yet I think I must agree with you that it is unlikely to be a mother-complex."

"Therefore," said Mr Gallagher, "when the rhinoceros charges the keeper it is not trying to kill its father: it is trying to kill the keeper. Things are much more like what they seem than Freud and the poet think they are."

"You believe," said Mr Shean, "that the human young throws off the maternal yoke as does the young rhinoceros? That an occasional weakling may be riddled with these monstrous 'complexes', but that they have been fantastically over-emphasized in contemporary literature? You defend the mothers of the nation against all these wicked aspersions on the admirable if faintly ridiculous phenomenon of mother-love? You believe heroes *are* heroes?"

"Mr Shean," said Mr Gallagher, "I do."

"In that case, Mr Gallagher," said Mr Shean, "I will confess to you. I also had a mother."

"A rhinoceros, I presume?" said Mr Gallagher.

## A MAN WITHOUT A MASK

TRYING to analyse William Blake—as critic after critic has attempted to do—is like trying to define the sunset: artists can paint it, writers describe it, scientists analyse it, yet evening after evening, elusive and inexhaustible in its mystery, the challenge is repeated in the sky. Despite all the attempts since the first full life of Blake was written (Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, newly added to Everyman's Library after having been many years out of print) nobody has yet come closer to a definition of the indefinable than did Samuel Palmer, who knew Blake, and who wrote to Gilchrist in 1855:

He was energy itself, and shed around him a kindling influence; an atmosphere of life, full of the ideal. To walk with him in the country was to perceive the soul of beauty through the forms of matter; and the high, gloomy buildings between which, from his study window, a glimpse was caught of the Thames and the Surrey shore, assumed a kind of grandeur from the man dwelling near them. Those may laugh at this who never knew such an one as Blake; but of him it is the simple truth.

He was a man without a mask; his aim single, his path straightforward, and his wants few; so he was free, noble and happy.

*A man without a mask . . .* that is as nearly perfect a summing-up on Blake as is ever likely to be made. All his virtues as a writer and an artist are implied in that phrase, and all his faults; the secret of his wisdom and the revelation of that near-madness which such men as Coleridge and Wordsworth thought was truly "insane". From the personal aspect the "mask" is the face a man wears in public; the pose which, consciously or unconsciously, he adopts to avert the persecutions of ridicule or the terrors of isolation; the denial or watering-down of individuality which he concedes to

society so that it may not be troubled with the hated spectacle of abnormality. Blake, as a man, wore no mask, adopted no pose, made no concessions to society.

None of the things he did in his life were really so very abnormal; certainly they were not mad. It was the way he did them that made them seem strange; the utter guilelessness, the utter "masklessness" that made those unacquainted with his ways feel that they had "found him out".

Gilchrist's *Life* tells the famous story of Blake and his wife, naked in their summer-house, being discovered by a visitor to whom Blake offered the explanation that they were reading Milton's *Paradise Lost* and had undressed to put themselves into the proper frame of mind. A fantastic story—yet odder things that the most ordinary people do are reported in the newspapers often enough; and in principle it is no madder than say, going to a hill-top to read Wordsworth. But Blake could not see that it was an odd thing to be *found* doing. It did not occur to him to put on the mask of either grin or blush, as would at once occur to the people whose private oddities get into the divorce courts.

Nor were the things Blake said—nine times out of ten—mad in their essence; it was the way he said them. All great artists would agree with Blake that for them to betray their art is the unpardonable sin; they might quite likely agree with him that they would be "punished in eternity" if they were false to the truth that was in them or failed to attempt work that was within their powers; but only a "man without a mask" could express that feeling as Blake did, in words that read like melodrama or madness but to him were simple honesty:

But if we fear to do the dictates of our Angels, and tremble at the Tasks set before us; if we refuse to do Spiritual Acts because of Natural Fears or Natural Desires! Who can describe the dismal torments of such a state! I too well remember the Threats I heard! "If you, who are organised by Divine Providence for Spiritual communion, Refuse, and bury your Talent in the Earth, even tho' you should want Natural Bread, Sorrow and Desperation pursues you thro' life, and after death shame and confusion to face to eternity. Every one in Eternity will leave you, aghast at the Man who was

crown'd with glory and Honour by his brethren, and betrayed their cause to their enemies. You will be call'd the base Judas who betray'd his Friend!" Such words would make any Stout man tremble, and how then could I be at ease? But I am no longer in That State, and now go on again with my Task, Fearless, and tho' my path is difficult, I have no fear of stumbling while I keep it.

Any painter, looking upon a fellow-painter with the customary goodwill, would be capable of thinking, as Blake did of Reynolds, "He was hired by Satan to depress art"; but only the man without a mask would say it in those words. Any writer, thinking about the iniquities of censorship, would say that it is certainly not the writer of a *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or a *Redheap* who is an enemy of literature, but the man who bans the book; but only a Blake would have the naïveté or the daring to declare that Voltaire's spirit had said to him, "I blasphemed the Son of Man And it shall be forgiven me, but they [the enemies of Voltaire] blasphemed the Holy Ghost in me, and it shall not be forgiven to them."

Any artist is likely to be pleased at his own output, but it is usually only the wife or the mirror in the bathroom who hears: "I have written more than Rousseau or Voltaire—Six or Seven Epic poems as long as Homer and 20 Tragedies as long as *Macbeth*."

And when the normal mask-wearing artist feels in high moments that his work has eternal significance and will have eternal life, he says with Keats "I think I shall be among the English poets after my death"; not with Blake:

I am more famed in Heaven for my works than I could well conceive. In my Brain are studies and Chambers filled with books and pictures of old, which I wrote and painted in ages of Eternity before my mortal life; and those works are the delight and Study of Archangels. Why, then, should I be anxious about the riches of fame or mortality?

It is a man's spirit speaking, absolutely free from the mask that hides the personality, the sophistication that subdues his utterances. It might easily be thought that here, in the completely unconfined outflow of the spirit, must be found

## *The Flesh and the Spirit*

sion in art. And so, sometimes, it is. In the of the "Prophetic Books" one will come to time a thought that could not possibly expressed; such a revelation as this, which fort a thought over which Wordsworth and Tennyson gave up in despair:

ie Flowers put forth their precious Odours,  
how from so small a centre comes such sweets,  
thin that Centre Eternity expands.

hetic Books", as a whole, are a dark and as the man's "mask" enables him to take ety, so does the artist's "mask" give to his 1 which enables them to take their place dition of creative effort. Because the true the uncontrolled "maskless" artist achieves most "flukes") artistic form on occasions, 1 the *Songs of Innocence*. But he can- and construction, vehemently as Blake al-, is just as necessary to great art as on Blake undoubtedly possessed and on triment as a builder, he placed his whole

## SIX AUSTRALIAN POETS

A roar of hooves, a lightning view of eyes  
Redder than fire, of long, straight whistling manes,  
Stiff crests, and tails drawn out against the skies,  
Of angry nostrils, webbed with leaping veins,  
The stallions come!

THAT is Hugh McCrae; and though T. Inglis Moore does not attempt a ranking of his luminaries in *Six Australian Poets*, it is to Hugh McCrae that the mind turns and returns while reading this pleasant addition to Australian criticism.

McCrae, Inglis Moore demonstrates by a comparison of lines such as

I leap with rage and seize my stick,  
Like Hitler turned quite lunatic,  
Throw open doors and cupboards wide,  
And canter down the stairs outside,  
Exclaiming "Damn!" and "Well, I'm blown!"

with the fire of the early poetry as in the "Stallions" piece, has had little of importance to say of recent years. "Imagination has dwindled to fancy", the singing joy to "playfulness", and so the critic is justified in regarding his poetic statement as complete. That applies to all the poets Inglis Moore deals with, except FitzGerald.

Pleasing as it is to see FitzGerald's merits recognized, he is one man whose placing among the six might have been postponed—not because he has not the same unmistakable poetic genuineness as Inglis Moore finds in the others, but because he is still a comparatively young poet in active and developing production. His place is not with the completed "classics"—McCrae, Neilson, O'Dowd, Baylebridge and Brennan—but with men such as Kenneth Slessor who are still in the process of "becoming".

The five, then, according to the critic, are the Australian classics. There are others of very nearly the same stature—Furnley Maurice and Mary Gilmore, for instance—but these five lead. Or, rather, these five and one more: for, lacking a study of “Banjo” Paterson, Inglis Moore’s book can never be the “canon” of the leading poets he intended it to be.

Representing the contemporary aversion from the balladists—the inevitable reaction to the overrating of them in the days when a ballad passed for serious poetry—Inglis Moore mentions Paterson only slightly and in passing. But Paterson spoke for Australia; Paterson had sunlight and colour; Paterson, as no other Australian poet except Hugh McCrae has done, came to his work with that joyous gusto, that fine arrogance, that triumphant recklessness which—witness Shakespeare’s plays or Byron’s *Don Juan*—is one of the hallmarks of enduring art. When a writer comes in thundering and flashing with the joy of life as Paterson does in “The Man from Snowy River”:

Then fast the horseman followed where the gorges deep and black  
Resounded to the thunder of their tread,  
And the stockwhips woke the echoes, and they fiercely answered  
back  
From cliffs and crags that beetled overhead—

it is no use trying to stop the stampede with banners labelled “Balladists Shall Not Pass”. Australian criticism will have to come to terms with the balladists, for they are the true pioneers of a distinctively Australian poetry. It is the mystery of art that Hugh McCrae’s stallions make poetry and “Banjo’s” horses only verse. But “Banjo” should have been in this book as a verse writer as good in his *métier* as the poets are in theirs.

It is just that note of arrogant vitality (the assurance of the born poet) that one misses in Inglis Moore’s other poets—Neilson, O’Dowd, Baylebridge and Brennan. That is not to say that some of these men are not poets. But they do not, as McCrae did, come to poetry with an air. With, as Yeats said, “a sword upstairs”.

Shaw Neilson was unquestionably a poet. Only a true poet could have written:

The young girl stood beside me. I  
Saw not what her young eyes could see:  
—A light, she said, not of the sky  
Lives somewhere in the Orange Tree. . . .  
—Listen! the young girl said. There calls  
No voice, no music beats on me;  
But it is almost sound: it falls  
This evening on the Orange Tree.

But place the total of Neilson's work beside the total of McCrae's, and how thin, how slight (however delicate) is the song. Never could Shaw Neilson shout in triumph with McCrae:

I blow my pipes, the glad birds sing.  
The fat young nymphs about me spring,  
I am the lord,  
I am the lord,  
I am the lord of everything.

Place Brennan's work beside McCrae's, and under that solemn shade, huge, vague and trembling with a melancholy music from the distance, Pan and his fat young nymphs may seem to look small. McCrae, Inglis Moore says, had no constructive power. The critic is inclined to give him credit marks for constructing such a ballad as "Red John", but a ballad is not the same thing as a "long poem" and, in any case, over most modern attempts to write medieval ballads hangs the taint of imitation. McCrae's attempts at dramatic poetry failed. Brennan, successful in the long poem, bulks huge beside him. And yet, if a comparison is made between the two, even when it is admitted that the long poem is preferable to the lyric, McCrae emerges as the stronger poet. If one takes a poet at his own valuation—and it is not unfair to do so, because all "personal poetry" such as Brennan's is a search for inner and fundamental truth—McCrae is "the lord of everything" and Brennan admits



my futile heart still wanders lost  
in the same vast and impotent dreams.

Throughout his poetic life Brennan was a dying swan. It was said in a radio talk recently that one could "speak of Brennan in the same breath as Yeats and Eliot". But A. G. Stephens was nearer the mark when he ruthlessly summed up:

Brennan's is a bush of poetry that smoulders and never really burns; an apparatus of patient craft that seldom becomes an artistic engine. Always busy with himself, his images remain external for others; they rarely make the decisive escape of poetry from the composer. Tolerable displays; some good sonorities; many efficient ideas; yet we sit in a theatre to watch a performance we do not often join.

Both in philosophy and in creative art, Yeats and Eliot made that "decisive escape". Carried to its logical conclusion, says Inglis Moore, Brennan's symbolism would lead to "nothing less than poetic nihilism"; his philosophy, in tune, leads to defeat and death. Even when he tries to sing defiantly, as he does in the noble sonorities of "O Desolate Eves"—

yet in that wind a clamour of trumpets rang,  
old trumpets, resolute, stark, undaunted,  
singing to battle against the eternal foe—

he fights in a doomed battle:

in some last fight, foredoom'd disastrous  
upon the final ridges of the world.

Curious that out of his own defeat a man can make strong poetry (as, in a different way, Herrick used to make songs out of the statement that he had nothing to sing). But, measuring strength against strength, the denial of life always pales before the affirmation—Lionel Johnson before Yeats, Brennan before McCrae. Is there any poetry that branched from Baudelaire—from Dowson and Johnson to the Brennan of "The Wanderer"—that is not fundamentally a surrender to death; tainted with the conception of the poet

not as the lord of life but as Baudelaire's captive albatross, wounded, persecuted, doomed?

In spite of the note of self-pity, Brennan is unquestionably a poet. The "Desolate Eves" passage is more than Miltonic in its sonorous splendour; it is Homeric. And if the symbolist "fading out into whiteness" ends in nihilism, there is fine and true poetry before it comes to that white death:

and darkling on my darkling hill  
heard through the beach's sullen boom  
heroic note of living will  
rung trumpet-clear against the fight;  
so stood and heard, and rais'd my eyes  
erect, that they might drink of space,  
and took the night upon my face.

This is not, like McCrae's poetry or Paterson's ballads, life with an air; but it is at least death with an air.

In Bernard O'Dowd's verses there is the oddest air ever worn by an Australian poet: a valiant attempt at the arrogance of the true poet, emerging, because O'Dowd was not at heart a poet but a moralist, as honest patriotism but false poetry. Take a McCrae verse in a high mood:

Clean running wave and sunward-soaring flower,  
The great hot sky, the colours of the wood  
Troubled with shadow, and the sudden shower  
Of heavenly fire across the solitude—

and take O'Dowd at his very best, in what Inglis Moore calls "the splendid uprushing sweep of his hopeful hymning of Australia":

All that we love in olden lands and lore  
Was signal of her coming long ago!  
Bacon foresaw her, Campanella, More,  
And Plato's eyes were with her star aglow!  
Who toiled for Truth, whate'er their countries were,  
Who fought for Liberty, they yearned for her!  
No corsair's gathering ground, nor tryst for schemers,  
No chapman Carthage to a huckster Tyre,  
She is the Eldorado of old dreamers,  
The Sleeping Beauty of the world's desire!

It is McCrae who is the poet—and that in spite of the fact that O'Dowd's stanza is the climax to a long poem, and that he had in his mind some epic vision of this country. McCrae's hot sky, as wide though only for a moment as O'Dowd's Australia, is an arrogant image burning with poetic truth. O'Dowd's "Sleeping Beauty"—an attempt at the arrogant poetic image—is (alas!) inflated. We are, we would admit, a pretty good people. We like "Banjo" Pater-son to tell us that

. . . all our roads are new and strange  
And through our blood there runs  
The vagabonding love of change  
That drove us westward of the range  
And westward of the suns.

But, "Plato's eyes were with her star aglow"; "the Sleeping Beauty of the world's desire"—that is coming it a bit too thick for the sardonic Australian!

In O'Dowd's finest poem, "The Bush", valuable in the first place because it is a long poem successfully carried to its conclusion, there are passages of genuine poetic importance, those stanzas in which he used a specifically Australian imagery in serious poetry as "Banjo" used it in the ballads. But, because he is primarily a moralist, a didactic writer ("Poetry Militant", he called his work), he is not fundamentally a poet at all in the sense that McCrae and Brennan are poets.

It may be admitted with Inglis Moore that O'Dowd's epigrams and social verses are, of their kind, excellent. In many of his quatrains he is as skilled an epigrammist as Pope is in his couplets. But, then, Pope is not a true poet, either. Art is not "a weapon". Aristotle, who said that the moral good of art is its catharsis in laughter or tears of the troubled spirit of man, knew more about poetry than Bernard O'Dowd, who said that it should crusade against the political ills, real or seeming, of the time.

True poetry, McCrae's lyricism or Shakespeare's drama, is no more a moral crusader than the stars at night are moral

crusaders. It is a spectacle bringing news of the gods; an image of the eternal joy or the eternal agony. From the spectacle the crusader draws what morals he chooses.

From the social versifying of "Poetry Militant", one returns to McCrae:

Then O, awake, Elizabeth,  
The dawn is in the aspen-tree,  
The air is rich with honey-breath . . .  
Come out, my love, and dance with me.

One returns to the joy of the gods. And, if the crusader retorts that the gods are not always joyful, to McCrae again for a rare image of the soul of man poised in proud and terrible solitude in eternity:

The hawk entowered in the sky,  
The lonely lord of heaven,  
At daybreak saw him solitary;  
And yet again at even.

Although Hartley Grattan in a foreword to *Six Australian Poets* offers the fantastic opinion that McCrae should not be included in the company, to what other poet could the verdict go if a contest were held to determine the finest Australian poet to date? (Why, incidentally, does an overseas "authority" have to introduce a book that specifically attacks "the colonial outlook"?)

The last possible contender, accepting Inglis Moore's canon, is Baylebridge. There is this great argument in Baylebridge's favour:

The quantity of writing is considerable in itself, and this, together with its range and variety, makes Baylebridge remarkable in a country whose genuine poets have rarely continued their poetic production or sustained its strength over the years. It is worth noting, too, that in this respect Baylebridge possesses one of the constituents of greatness, for, although quantity alone may be worth nothing as such, yet the poets whom we accept as great in English literature—Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Blake [Tut!], Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning, for example—all have to their credit a solid body of writing which has enabled them to play on more than a single note, to display a broad mastery of diversified expression, and to

achieve a certain weight of dignity. As poets, as well as producers of poems, they bulk more impressively than a Herrick or a Housman, a player on one or two strings.

True, very true (except that to call Blake a "great" poet is to fall headlong into a fashionable Bedlam). What, then, comprises Baylebridge's bulk? Chiefly, *This Vital Flesh*, which includes the long philosophical poems "Life's Testament" and "The New Life"; and *Love's Ephemeris*, of which the outstanding section is the sonnet sequence "Love Redeemed". And the poetic merit of these long poems? After praising highly (" 'Truffled' appeals to me especially") truffles such as this:

The brain, the blood, the busy thews  
That truffled in the primal ooze  
Support me yet; till ice shall grip  
The heart of earth, they shall not lose—

Inglis Moore records of "Life's Testament": "Unfortunately, Baylebridge cannot keep it up." And then after gallantly truffling among the Nietzschean philosophizings of "The New Life", the critic decides:

How much of this philosophy in "The New Life" is transmuted into poetry? Very little, I am afraid. The verse remains statements put into metre and rhyme. The language is vigorous enough, and eloquent on occasion, but it lacks the finer breath of poetry.

That is exact criticism. Inconsistently, Inglis Moore picks out one of the worst "statements put into metre and rhyme" and says it can "stand on its own poetic feet"—but compare any Hugh McCrae lyric about love with this cry of Baylebridge's for a high Australian birthrate, so oddly reminiscent of a poultry-farmer calling up his flock:

Women's holy bodies hither  
Hail from every end of Earth—  
Men, to help work out our whither,  
'Gainst that solemn-coming birth!  
Bone we build on: haste to flood  
Our clamoring Land with flesh and blood,

It is interesting, certainly; it is vigorous; it is wise; but it is not poetry. The sonnet sequence is another matter. Here there are lines that McCrae might envy:

At sight, yes, she illumed me—like a splendour  
Flashed on the soul in some immaculate dream.

And lines that Brennan would have been proud to own:

The quiet moon, immaculate of face,  
Her silver pours—it floods the solemn fields;  
The glimmering pastures lengthen into space.

There are flashes of magnificent poetry, clear and assured. But, unfortunately, there are not only lines that Wordsworth would have been delighted to write: there are lines that Wordsworth wrote: or very nearly so. Sonnet LXXIV immediately suggests Wordsworth's "Sonnet on Westminster Bridge":

I walked our headland—for at dawn I woke—  
And watched the city, proudly, like a queen,  
Lift from her shoulders fair that marvellous cloak  
Where pearl and opal the pale silvers grain—

for Wordsworth observed

The city now doth like a garment wear  
The beauty of the morning.

Baylebridge goes on:

Not the tranced heart of the impetuous world  
More beauty dreams than now address these eyes.

Wordsworth, too, saw a dreaming heart:

Dear God, the very houses seem asleep  
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

Baylebridge proceeds:

Soft as a vow, still as a banner furled,  
Deep-hushed as orisons where breath has flown  
To heaven in adoration.

And one cannot help recalling that Wordsworth, not in the "Bridge" sonnet, but in an evening piece, wrote:

The holy time is quiet as a nun,  
Breathless with adoration.

These unmistakable echoes of Wordsworth seem to have escaped Inglis Moore, but he deals at length with the more obvious limitation to one's appreciation of "Love Redeemed" in Baylebridge's frank imitation of Shakespeare. "In truth, the timbre of Baylebridge's native originality emerges slightly muffled out of his Shakespearean loudspeaker." One can agree with him that, despite the use of the Shakespearean instrument, there speaks "the authentic voice of a poet". But one cannot possibly agree that "actually, no Australian poet is more individual and vital".

Baylebridge is clearly a poet at heart, certainly a poet in occasional flashes of execution, but he has failed in the great test of developing an individual style. How can a man come with pride to poetry when he comes in another's cloak? We would not think highly of Shakespeare if his best work consisted of first-class narrative poems in imitation of Chaucer.

And so, one returns to McCrae:

I seek her in the labyrinthine maze  
Of stars unravelling their golden chain,  
And, from my cavern, mark the lightning blaze  
A pathway for her down the singing rain.

McCrae—if it was the great song of Homer or Shakespeare he sought—never found her. Australia still awaits its Shakespeare or its Browning. We have never had a major poet. But we have had one lyricist to place beside Herrick and Suckling, and that's no mean achievement.

Inglis Moore carefully avoids coming to any such conclusion about the superiority of one of his poets to the others. *Six Australian Poets* is intended to be a persuasive book: to persuade his readers that each of his six poets is of considerable stature, to argue that Australian poetry can

be judged by world standards, and to stimulate interest in the works of each of the six. As such—this article as witness—it is successful. There are faults of style when the author strains for effect; faults of generosity; and, of course (every critic says this about another) incomprehensible lapses of taste. But, on the whole, a discerning book, an authoritative book, a valuable book, and a pleasant one.



## ESCAPES FROM ART

### I

#### BLAMING THE AGE

Every age gets the art it deserves and every age must accept the art it gets.

—T. S. ELIOT.

If it is impossible for us, under the circumstances amidst which we live, to think clearly, to feel nobly and to delineate firmly. . . .

—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Brennan, the genius and great scholar, was too big a whale to find full realisation in our shallow cultural sea.

—MILES FRANKLIN.

When European civilisation itself is threatened one turns for a kind of illumination not to the literature of New Zealand but to a mature European mind: "between two worlds, one dead, The other powerless to be born."

—E. H. MCCORMICK.

If all these assertions are true, and they are made by some formidable authorities, it is futile to ask for giant art from New Zealand now, or at any time until the "new world" is born. Mr McCormick (the quotation is the conclusion to his centennial *Letters and Art in New Zealand*) does not specify the nature of his new world, but, assuming that he means a world of eternal love, peace and justice, it may be unwise to expect any great work from New Zealanders before the Millennium.

On Miles Franklin's authority it would have been futile to demand a full achievement in poetry from Christopher Brennan (or any other Australian artist with the capacity for major art) during the years 1870-1932.

On Matthew Arnold's authority, it was impossible to construct great art in England during the years 1822-88.

On T. S. Eliot's authority (the quotation is from his foreword to *A Little Book of Modern Verse*, selected by Anne Ridler) it has been impossible, from 1844, when Gerard Manley Hopkins was born, to the year when the essay was written, 1942, for any of the writers he surveys to have written more or better poetry.

In one place or another, then, the political situation ever since 1822 has been so bad that poets, always hungering for greatness, might just as well not have been born. There has not been a single interval of grace in all that time when art had an opportunity to come to its full flower. Minor art there might be; but not the great song. For that, one needs the Golden Age.

Since the Golden Age is thus held indispensable to the production of major poetry, the first task of any examination of the state and prospects of the arts is obviously to determine what constitutes that happy time and when such times existed.

Everybody knows the answer to that. The Golden Age in which we shall all be able to write the masterpieces we now can only dream about will be the time of universal peace and love. No time (we feel with Mr McCormick) could be less suited to the practice of the arts than the year in which this essay is being written (1942). Hitler ravages Europe. The hordes of Asia march towards Australia and New Zealand. A Sydney Sunday newspaper is perturbed because we have not yet had an "instalment" of the New Order. The world, clearly, has fallen into chaos. What art (we ask with T. S. Eliot) other than the image of chaos, frustration and despair does such an age deserve? If, in the last pale gesture of defiance, our trembling fingers reach for the pen, we must write with Clifford Dymont (quoted from *Poems of this War*, an anthology edited by Patricia Ledward):

Shouldering a way through crowds,  
Or brooding with the dance of leaf  
Delightful on the sunlit page,  
I freeze in grief

For trees that will not bud in Spring  
Now murder drags faith from its bed,  
And the potential serpent coils  
In the stern head,

But know sorrow will not ease  
Eyes empty in the last despair:  
For me now are the claws of love,  
And the sick prayer.

With the young man who has joined the R.A.F. in Tam-bimuttu's anthology *Poetry in War Time*, incapable even of the "sick prayer", we go apathetically to our doom:

And now I take a man's state by a number  
and wrong will be the measurements I learned  
somewhere once, in a decorative summer.  
I go to aid the battle and may now die  
a watching failure not many can comprehend,  
available for death on land, on sea, in sky.

Before the war broke out we felt with Stephen Spender "our laughter dancing stop, Or ride to a gap". And, enduring the war, we wonder with Spender whether Victory and Defeat are not "the same Hollow masks worn by shame". We don't get much fun out of being alive; and if our readers don't get much fun out of our verses, it's their own fault: "Every age gets the art it deserves." Far in the future or far in the past lies the Golden Age.

This war still in progress, Disarmament as far and fabulous as the moon, the wicked middle-classes not yet bleeding in the streets of Sydney, it seems that no living man can hope to see that age of universal bliss in which he can make great art. For us there is only the melancholy satisfaction of searching into the past for the golden times into which men more fortunate than ourselves or Matthew Arnold were born.

Whereupon we find the shocking, the deplorable, the fantastic, the monstrous paradox that the Golden Age to which Arnold yearned was the era when an earlier con-

queror strode in blood and fire across Europe and threatened England with invasion.

Yet now, when boldest wills give place,  
When Fate and Circumstance are strong,  
And in their rush the human race  
Are swept, like huddling sheep, along;

Those sterner spirits let me prize,  
Who, though the tendence of the whole  
They less than us might recognize,  
Kept, more than us, their strength of soul.

Our bane, disguise it as we may  
Is weakness, is a faltering course;  
Oh that past times could give one day,  
Join'd to its clearness, of their force!

Looking back from the stormy twentieth century upon the comparatively tranquil and prosperous nineteenth, nobody could help wondering what on earth Matthew Arnold was making such a fuss about. Napoleon died the year before Arnold was born; and yet Arnold insisted that all was wrong with the world: "O born in days when wits were fresh and clear," he addressed his "Scholar Gipsy"—

And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;  
Before this strange disease of modern life,  
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,  
Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts, was rife—  
Fly hence, our contact fear.

"Fly hence" in 1822-88! "Stay put!" is the advice we would give to anyone living in those blessed years. But Arnold was very sure that his peace was not peaceful—or too peaceful; that great art in his time was not possible; and that, if only he had been able to join old Wordsworth sitting upon a hill-top and composing irate (and very bad) sonnets to scare Napoleon away, all his unwritten masterpieces would have sprung into the sunlight.

But we, brought forth and rear'd in hours  
 Of change, alarm, surprise—  
 What shelter to grow ripe is ours?  
 What leisure to grow wise?

Too fast we live, too much are tried,  
 Too harass'd to attain  
 Wordsworth's sweet calm, or Goethe's wide  
 And luminous view to gain.

Recalling that Shakespeare wrote with the turbulence of the Renaissance and the quarrels of England and Spain beating about his head; that Milton saw the Cromwellian upheaval; and that in Arnold's Golden Age of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars there flourished Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron, one might be tempted to agree that—whatever we think of our own situation—the piping times of peace are historically the worst times for piping. But that would be to ignore (as Arnold mysteriously contrived to do) the historical fact that in his weak and faltering days not only did he himself manage to write poetry that very nearly attained major status, as also did Rossetti and William Morris, but that major poetry was written by Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne. While Matthew Arnold was lamenting in verse and criticism that all was wrong with his world, the magnificent Browning was shouting that

Morning's at seven,  
 The hillside's dew-pearled,  
 God's in his heaven—  
 All's right with the world!

And it is clear to us now that in Matthew Arnold's time all was as nearly right with the world as it ever had been or is ever likely to be.

Nearly all assertions as to the impossibility of producing great art in any given age are made loosely. Matthew Arnold, we know from his life and his work, made this one slip in the finest essay on poetry ever written—the preface to his poems of 1853—in a pardonable attempt to disguise his own

inadequacies in life and art. He made no attempt to find any historical justification for his apologia, and if he had examined history he must have found that major art occurs in all ages, under all political systems, in war and in peace, in periods of faith and in periods of doubt, in changing times and in static times, whenever a great artist happens to be born. Mr McCormick, declaring that great writing could not spring from New Zealand until a "new world" was born, obviously did not pause to reflect that, while never since men began to live, to toil and to die upon the earth has any new world been born, somehow or other the long hexameters rolled from the lips of Homer, Æschylus and Euripides staged their dark and murderous dramas, Dante saw heaven and hell, Shakespeare created Lear and Falstaff, and Milton poured into the figures of Lucifer and Samson all the passionate defiance of his spirit. When she wrote (in *Southerly*) that Brennan could not find full realization in "our shallow cultural seas" Miles Franklin could not have given thought to the fact that the population of England in Shakespeare's day was roughly that of Australia in Brennan's, and that, while writing as Brennan did for a few intellectuals and an uncultured populace, Shakespeare certainly came to full realization in England's shallow seas.

T. S. Eliot, however (it would be hard to find a single example of loose thinking in Eliot's criticism), has spoken with forethought. Before he makes his odd defence of "modern" poetry, sounding so much more like a condemnation—"Every age gets the art it deserves and every age must accept the art it gets"—he reasons:

If we like the work of a particular poet, we are usually willing to allow that he has expressed more than he has been aware of, that he is the voice of his time, or in some sense the instrument of unknown powers: if we dislike it, we are only too ready to put down what seem to us his faults to his own perversity, affectation or incompetence.

Accepting that—and it is an argument difficult to counter, for surely, one is tempted to agree, Shakespeare "expressed"

the vigour and colour of the Elizabethans, Byron the pride and cynicism of the early nineteenth-century aristocracy, Tennyson the Victorian complacency and Eliot himself (in "The Waste Land" and "The Hollow Men") the contemporary frustration and gloom—it most certainly follows that every age deserves the art it gets. And so there should be both an explanation and a justification of the worst faults of modern poetry in this paragraph from Francis Scarfe's *Auden and After*:

The accusation of insincerity and futility directed against Spender (who stands, incidentally, very much in the same relation to Auden as Shelley did to Byron) is very wide of the mark. The critics in political blinkers should realise that these poets of the 'thirties, producing works like Spender's "Vienna", Auden's "Spain", Barker's "Calamiterror" and Day Lewis's "The Nabara", represent first of all a disintegration of the bourgeoisie, and secondly a disintegration of bourgeois æsthetic values.

But is Eliot's theory acceptable? Is it not in fact utterly wrong, the exact reverse of the truth, which is that the poet creates the age, not the age the poet?

Before one can decide that Shakespeare "expressed" the Elizabethans (that, in effect, the Elizabethans created Shakespeare; that the true author of the plays was the mysterious Spirit of the Age, working through the puppet from Stratford-on-Avon) one would have to be convinced that there was, as a historical fact, some unique vigour in that period: not merely vigour and colour, but, since Shakespeare stands alone in literature, *unique* power in the age. One must be convinced that the Renaissance was a more powerful phenomenon than the Industrial Revolution; that the war against Phillip, muddled and half-hearted though history records it, was prosecuted with more gallantry than (in Byron's time) Nelson's and Wellington's battles against Napoleon; that the deeds of Drake and Raleigh were more stirring to the soul than those feats of heroism in our own time of war which, recorded daily in the newspapers, are so stupendous and so numerous that the mind reels absorbing them. Before one can decide that Byron and Shelley "expressed their age" one

must reconcile oneself—by Heaven only knows what somersaults of the mind—to the historical fact that their age rejected and reviled them and drove them both into exile.

If our own age is so full of chaos and despair that the poets are forced to be chaotic and despairing, how does it come about that Eliot in his later poetry has emerged to faith and cohesion? Is the American Paul Engle somehow not living in the age he lives in when, full of vigour and courage, he writes in *West of Midnight*:

Five hours west of midnight from the edge  
Of that disastrous continent where men  
Black out against the droning, dangerous sky,  
Their little light contrived against the dark,  
You travel backward into day and find  
Suddenly overhead in the glowing air  
American sun, gigantic in its light.

What happens to Eliot's theory when even in troubled Europe John Pudney can write of the young airmen ("The Dead", from *Dispersal Point*):

The victim gods in an heroic age  
They ride like thunder where man's fear and greed  
Are frontiers locked in mean outrage;  
These fly, now engined by all human need.  
These, wishing life, must range the falling sky,  
Whom an heroic moment calls to die.

Is it of some other time than our own that Laurence Whistler (who in both Patricia Ledward's anthology and Tambimuttu's looks like a coming man) writes with such brave acceptance:

Thus for the island Genius, Liberty,  
Much loved by Roman letters in our stone,  
Another generation learns to die  
Gravely, not caring if the flags are flown,  
Believing simply it must save for Earth  
A way of life becoming to mankind,  
A grace of centuries, a thing of worth:  
This we believe, who by a peaceful hearth  
Have laughing eyes tonight, but are not blind.



If posterity reads Auden, Spender and Eliot's "Waste Land" and assumes that they spoke for our time, it will decide that we were a rabble of wailing defeatists. If it reads Whistler and Paul Engle, it will decide that we walked the earth like gods. The spirit of the age unquestionably affects the artist; but the spirit is infinitely complex and it seems pure chance, depending on the response, spirit and talent of the individual to some aspect of that complexity, that any given image of the period is transmitted to posterity so that it may say "This is the Elizabethan spirit" or "This the Twentieth Century". It is more accurate to say that the poet creates the age than that the age creates the poet.

Dealing with such vast generalities, a precise statement is impossible. But on the immediate effect of Eliot's doctrine on the practice of poetry there can be no debate; like all other attempts to absolve the poet from personal responsibility for the fulfilment of the talent with which he was born, it is wholly pernicious. Disguised as a principle of criticism, it is nothing less than the upholding of our old friend Determinism as against Free Will, an attitude which, as a churchman, Eliot has specifically rejected.

## II

### FREUDIAN OBSCURITY

I am going to have a twin yes I am Love, I am tired of being just one.

—GERTRUDE STEIN.

Yeliu apaoki Ouanyen akouta.

—EZRA POUND.

Bababadal gharagh takaniminarronnkonnbronntonnerronn tuonnth-unntrovarrhounawnskawntoohooohooordenenthurnuk!

—JAMES JOYCE.

The bagpipe-breasted ladies in the deadweed.

—DYLAN THOMAS.

It [Cecil Day Lewis's "Magnetic Mountain"] might also have been a father-complex similar to Wordsworth's, who was also obsessed by mountains.

—FRANCIS SCARFE.

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep.

—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

In the first part of this essay an endeavour was made to establish the principle of the personal responsibility of the artist for the fulfilment of the talent with which he was born. It was demonstrated that in all ages writers without the capacity or the heart for major achievement have magnified the eternal difficulty of art into temporary impossibility, and it was asserted that writers in the present century—in Australia or New Zealand as in England—are, unless they choose to be, no more at the mercy of the “spirit of the age” than were Shakespeare or Milton, Byron or Browning. It was pointed out, too, that the “Spirit of the Age” is infinitely complex, and that our own time, depicted by so many writers as chaotic and despairing, is reflected in more virile writing as heroic.

In all ages, men live and die in a vast muddle. If a strong political system gives a semblance of cohesion, there is always the dissentient minority. Even in times when religious faith is comparatively secure, and human life seems to stand upon a rock, the majority has seldom been over-impatient to jump off it into the bliss of eternity. And never at any time has the personal emotional framework or life itself been secure. In the great muddle of love and hate, good and evil, faith and disbelief, courage and despair, the artist affirms or denies as he chooses, clarifies as best he can, presents such image of the eternal duality as suits his disposition and his capacity.

Although, excusing his own incapacity, Matthew Arnold denied the potentialities of life and art in his own time, he took his stand as a critic with those who believe that the artist should affirm life. For him, as for Aristotle, the ultimate test of the excellence of a work of art was whether or not, in the midst of the great muddle, it affirmed “by the imitation of great actions” the tragic splendour of the life of man on the earth *as men live it*.

The Poet, then, has in the first place to select an excellent action; and what actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race,

and which are independent of time. . . . To the elementary part of our nature, to our passions, that which is great and passionate is eternally interesting; and interesting solely in proportion to its greatness and to its passion. . . .

Any accurate representation may be expected to be interesting; but, if the representation be a poetical one, more than this is demanded. It is demanded not only that it shall interest, but also that it shall inspirit and rejoice the reader.

Tragedy as well as comedy or the lyric can inspirit the reader, Matthew Arnold continues. So tremendous, so terrifying almost, is the *interest* of man in the spectacle of life that "the more tragic the situation, the deeper becomes the enjoyment; and the situation is more tragic in proportion as it becomes more terrible". Light or dark, man is prepared in fact to accept life on earth; and criticism applauds that art which, ignoring the prejudices and fashions of the moment, presents an acceptance of the eternal struggle: the art of Homer, who saw war as his gods saw it; the art of Shakespeare, to whom Lady Macbeth gave as much delight as Juliet, Lear as Falstaff; the art of Walt Whitman, who refused to "sweat and whine" at life's conditions; the art of the later Eliot delighting in Becket's martyrdom; the art of Yeats, proclaiming "I am content to live it all again!"

From this most desirable art which accepts and presents a heroic image of the life of man, there were, Arnold believed, two escapes, both to be deplored. One, the escape which rejects life as it is:

What then are the situations from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured and nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.

And the other, the escape into one's own personality, evading the labour of externalization, which is the essence of creative art:

The modern critic not only permits a false practice; he absolutely prescribes false aims.—“A true allegory of the state of one’s own mind in a representative history,” the Poet is told, “is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry.” —And, accordingly, he attempts it. An allegory of the state of one’s own mind, the highest problem of an art which imitates actions! No, assuredly it is not, it never can be so: no great poetical work has ever been produced with such an aim. *Faust* itself, in which something of the kind is attempted . . . judged as a whole, and judged strictly as a poetical work, is defective.

It is further evidence of the truth of the theory advanced in this essay, that the problems of art are eternally the same, that Matthew Arnold has set out here exactly the two great faults that have brought art in our time—painting and the highest flights of the novel as well as poetry—to its indubitable disgrace. Unaltered in spirit in spite of the names we give them, what are the Leftist and the Freudian movements in modern letters but the old deplorable escapes—one rejecting life as men live it, the other burrowing and drowning in the bogs of the personality?

It is difficult to say which of the two movements has been, at its extreme, the more callow. Taking the Freudian first, let us have Mr Scarfe’s *Auden and After* again:

*“It might have been a father-complex similar to Wordsworth’s, who was also obsessed by mountains.”*

To illustrate the absurdity of such a contribution to our understanding of God, art and man, it is almost sufficient merely to quote, as above, a single line of Wordsworth’s poetry. Although one knows that whole skyscrapers of modern criticism (Herbert Read’s, for example) have been built on such foundations, it seems unbelievable that Mr Scarfe’s observation could have been uttered. Can the young giants of contemporary poetry, most of whom are now near their forties, seriously believe that when Wordsworth cried out in joy and triumph

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep  
the underlying meaning was that he wished to murder his father and commit incest with his mother?

The Freudian theory may easily be countered, if one chooses to argue it, by the opinions of Jung and his followers, who would say that, although Wordsworth's mountains might have symbolized his father, they also symbolized his ancestors and the gods. Which, of course, puts us right back where we were before Freud first came down like a wolf on the fold; for if we agree with Jung that Wordsworth spoke for "the gods", we might just as well admit that the poet himself, who never doubted that he was divinely inspired, was right all along. The Freudian concept is interesting enough from the viewpoint of psychology as possibly explaining the *mechanism* of poetry but it can tell us nothing of any real value, as Freud himself finally admitted, about the *source* of poetry. From the literary viewpoint, the matter is simply not worth arguing. The Freudians offer their little "explanation" about the dear old father-complex, Wordsworth offers the challenge of a heart filled with the terror or triumph of the gods:

Not for these I raise  
 The song of thanks and praise;  
 But for those obstinate questionings  
 Of sense and outward things,  
 Fallings from us, vanishings;  
 Blank misgivings of a creature  
 Moving about in worlds not realised,  
 High instincts before which our mortal nature  
 Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised:  
 But for those first affections,  
 Those shadowy recollections,  
 Which, be they what they may,  
 Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,  
 Are yet a master light-of all our seeing;  
 Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
 Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
 Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,  
 To perish never;  
 Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,  
 Nor Man nor Boy,  
 Nor all that is at enmity with joy,

Can utterly abolish or destroy!  
 Hence in a season of calm weather  
 Though inland far we be,  
 Our souls have sight of that immortal sea  
 Which brought us hither,  
 Can in a moment travel thither,  
 And see the children sport upon the shore,  
 And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

How limited and how degrading is a concept of art that sees upon such lofty snows of poetry only the irrelevant toad of a "father-complex"! And yet, absurd and pitifully meagre as it is, the Freudian concept has penetrated everywhere into modern art, making pictures ugly, poetry obscure, criticism ridiculous and excusing all its manifest pettinesses by the stock phrase, "Yes, but at least it is interesting!" The hookworm is also "interesting" scientifically, but it does not rank high as a work of art. At the moment the Freudian concept is making some headway in Australia, so that one finds an art critic seriously lamenting that there is too much joy and meaning in Australian painting and not enough melancholia; and one finds in the September *Southerly* a critic seriously puzzling himself about the possible meanings of the poems of a very young man who is exploring his very young soul at one of our universities. (In case this should be interpreted as an attack on *Southerly* or a condemnation of a poet who is still much too young to be condemned, it should be made clear that the magazine is recognized as the most promising critical medium in the country; and that, having abounding energy, considerable command of language and the courage to seek for his own way of writing, the poet may do very well indeed if he learns that what he likes to call "biology" and "creating the Myth" are simply the normal interests of all young poets—love, and reforming the world.)

On those writers who have wholly or partly surrendered to the personal escape in our time, Freud has had an effect so devastating that the harm far outweighs any advantage they may have obtained in a clearer insight into human

character. Taken without the snigger that usually accompanies it, the Freudian concept of life, of art, of man and of the supernatural is—as the quotations from Scarfe and Wordsworth have surely demonstrated—extraordinarily limited; taken with the snigger (“Somebody has said that the ‘Magnetic Mountain’ was Auden”) it is degrading. Again limited and degrading is the definition of the artist as “a social misfit who tries to reconcile himself with society through his art”. Abdicating to that monstrous lie, what artist could hope to produce major works? Really believing it, what artist, for very shame, could function at all?

Chief among those who have accepted the Freudian degradation (or professed to have accepted it) Mr Scarfe lists W. H. Auden, and, as the emergence of Auden’s verse is the most sensational event in the world of poetry since Eliot wrote “The Waste Land” (not the most *important* event, which was Eliot’s adventure into drama in *Murder in the Cathedral*), his case is worth considering. Auden is essentially too good a poet ever to have completely surrendered either to the Leftist or the Freudian escapes, but he has made so many temporary concessions to the creeds that his verse is a museum of the most entertaining idiocies of both. In his verse play *The Ascent of F6*, as Mr Scarfe points out, the ubiquitous Œdipus-complex—turnip-headed apparition stalking the night of how many contemporary poems, novels and paintings!—bows again to the “interested” public.

A major theme in “The Ascent of F.6” is the mother-fixation or Œdipus-complex, which, far from reaching the heights of sublimity one might expect, is presented in a somewhat contemptible and ridiculous light.

Although in his own verse Mr Scarfe has progressed from what he admits was the “illness” of surrealism to the clear, heroic acceptance shown in the very fine poem about an airman by which he is represented in Tambimuttu’s *Poetry in Wartime*—

Climb, Icarus, higher: the Sun will stand still to greet you,  
The world turn its shoulder, the Moon give a friendlier stare:  
It is only your courage can break your wild heart and break you—

he is not yet prepared, as a critic, wholeheartedly to condemn the Freudian viewpoint. *Auden and After* amounts as a whole to an uneasy realization that there might be such a thing as common sense and that, contrary to long belief, common sense might have something to do with poetry. Still hoping that a philosophy which explains away all the heroism of men of action as a sublimation of incestuous desires (the hero of Auden's play is a mountaineer) might "reach the heights of sublimity" he cannot quite bring himself to admit that the productions of such a viewpoint are *necessarily* "contemptible and ridiculous". Critical honesty forces him to the conclusions, however, that

The weakness of Auden's psychology is that it is too often based on sweeping generalizations. The pseudo-psychology by which disease is represented purely as a defence-mechanism and selfishness leads Auden very often to treat suffering cruelly as though it were a joke.

He cannot accept Auden's defence of the Freudian definition of the artist as "a crank", and he believes "Auden, like most of us, was also too ready to accept the overemphasis on sex for which we must blame all lay disciples of Freud".

If he had followed the Freudian trail further, Mr Scarfe might have realized that Auden's "toughness", his obscurity and his eschewing of "poetic" words (the use of which by Stephen Spender the critic sensibly defends) are the result of the fear and shame with which Freud infected the intellectuals who chose to submit to him. Freudian theory in itself contains no stigma; but Freudian theory applied to art has always had the stigma added, so that poets in our time have been afraid to write naturally on the great traditional themes of love, landscape or heroic action lest they should reveal to the sniggers of the sophisticated some dire secret of the subconscious. All Auden's jeering, all his toughness, all his obscurity, all his seeming irresponsibility may be



traced to this fear of saying the wrong thing according to Freud.

Writers and artists who have used Freud to escape the burden of true creation have thus found themselves driven to the most frantic efforts to escape Freud. Like the Old Man of the Sea, Freud clings to their shoulders in the dark labyrinths of the personality, direful, malevolent, accusing the artist himself of the identical "complexes" which it amused him so much to detect in ordinary humanity. If the avoidance of all mention of love, of the moon, of trees, water, mountains, friendship and heroism unaccountably fails to produce the major art expected; and if the great debunkers are themselves debunked by very word they write, there is perhaps one last glorious escape from both art and Freud: and that is to be so sternly unintelligible that not Freud himself, let alone the ordinary critic, could have the faintest idea what you are talking about.

Surely it is the twofold desire of escaping from art and escaping from Freud that has begotten the most difficult, the most "sophisticated", the most unintelligible art of our time. The vulgar displays of private erudition in "*The Waste Land*", in Pound's *Cantos* and in Auden's *New Year Letter*; Gertrude Stein's prattling, as of an idiot child; and, worse than any, the escape into a private language as in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and the early poems of Dylan Thomas—all these which we find "interesting" are merely, in the aggravated form of unintelligibility, those "allegories of the state of one's own mind" which Matthew Arnold rightly judged to be an escape into inferior art.

### III

#### THE COLLAPSE OF THE LEFTISTS

Are we to believe, then, that Auden and his friends deliberately isolated themselves from their own class for the fun of the thing, and for ten years packed their voluminous work with revolutionary ideas in which they did not believe?

—FRANCIS SCARFE.

Why, I would ask, is most religious verse so bad; and why does so little religious verse reach the highest level of poetry? Largely, I think, because of a pious insincerity. The capacity for writing poetry is rare; the capacity for religious emotion of the first intensity is rare; and it is to be expected that the existence of both capacities in the same individual should be rarer still.

—T. S. ELIOT.

When one or other of the eternal escapes from art—into the personality or out into railing at life—is carried to its logical extreme, it passes, for a time, into limbo. It will reappear in some new mask, but, temporarily, a “movement” has ended. There has been nothing as oddly conclusive as Lionel Johnson’s tumble from the high-stool in the pub—the end of the cult of the personality in the nineties—to mark the dissolution of the contemporary Freudian cult, but because in two ways it has been brought to its extreme it is likely that its reign is over.

As was suggested above, both the surrender to Freud and the desperate flight from Freud lead inevitably to obscurity. If among intellectualist groups obscurity in a painting, novel or a poem came to be valued for its own sake, so that the more a work concealed its meaning the more it was prized, that has never been true of the ordinary cultivated reader, who from generation to generation makes the “classics” and who has a perverse desire to know, when an artist is talking to him, what he is talking about. The Ordinary Cultivated Reader (let him have the capitals he deserves) has long ago, with every justification, given up the attempt to read poets who set out deliberately to mystify him: and if, through doing so, he has missed some good works thrown out in aberrations of lucidity, the writers have only themselves to blame. For the Ordinary Cultivated Reader, therefore, the Freudian movement was dead from the beginning.

It is questionable whether it has ever been quite so much alive for the intellectuals as they liked to believe. Of all the hundreds who have professed to admire “*The Waste Land*”, how many really took the trouble to read Miss Jessie Weston’s

From *Ritual to Romance* to find out what it was all about? Surely the majority simply decided that it was "new", it was "interesting" and therefore, automatically, good. At any rate, if "The Waste Land" was not too much for the intellectuals, it has always been obvious that Gertrude Stein had no great following and Pound's *Cantos* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* seem to have aroused more doubt than enthusiasm. Because it carried Freudian obscurity to its absolute limit—exploration of the ineffable in a private language—*Finnegans Wake* may conveniently be regarded as the extreme and the collapse of the movement. It is not possible for anyone, even Dylan Thomas, to be more obscure; consequently, if he wishes to develop from Joyce, Thomas can only be less obscure: can only begin the long trail back to common sense.

Freudian obscurity is not yet recognized to be dead. On the contrary, Francis Scarfe's *Auden and After* records that Dylan Thomas is leading a new group—"The Apocalyptic"—in some direction or other. But whether Thomas wishes to lead them into or out of the wilderness, he must inevitably, it seems, lead them out. With the ingenuity born of a monumental confusion of mind, Mr Scarfe manages to advise Thomas in the one paragraph to be more Freudian—

He seeks the world in himself, and consequently his work is entirely autobiographical. His future depends on an enlarging of his simple vision of the sexual basis of life, and it is to be hoped that he will not abandon his essential subject. That problem itself, and his evident conflict as to its solution, should provide him with an inexhaustible and vital theme. He is potentially the most modern of the young poets now writing because of his assimilation of Joyce, Freud and the Bible—

and less Freudian—

Technically he has little to do save to give his verbal inventions a better grounding in reality and in philology, to concentrate even more on that "main moving column" [of meaning] and to concede less to that delight in a grimace by which every poet is tempted.

Which, summed up, presumably means that "The Apoca-

lyptics" should, and probably will, come to their senses: make their meanings plain, stop playing fancy tricks with the language and, having "enlarged their simple vision", abandon nine-tenths of it as arty and trivial.

While the cultivated obscurity of the Freudian exploitation of the personality thus came more or less quietly to its end with the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, the "debunking" of the heroic in man crashed dramatically with the departure of Auden for America upon the outbreak of war. The Freudians were trapped in the tunnel of their own logic. If the values that had served, stabilized and inspired mankind for centuries were proved false; if nationalism, as an enlargement of the ego, was to be disapproved and patriotism to be deplored; if the mountaineer, the explorer, the pioneer, the sailor, the soldier and the young airman fighting the Battle of Britain—all men in whom burned the light of heroism—were merely sublimating their "complexes", and if heroism, whatever its psychological mechanism, were not to be valued for its own sake as a contribution to the glory of mankind, what could any logical Freudian do upon the outbreak of war but pack his bags for what then appeared to be a neutral and unheroic America?

At this point the Freudian movement becomes inextricably entangled with Leftism in modern letters, for Auden's departure dramatized not only the collapse of those who belittled and degraded life but of those who, unable to accept the eternal duality, railed and wailed helplessly at the fundamental conditions upon which life is offered to us—at the fact that all life preys upon other life.

So rigid has the orthodoxy of the Left become, even in Australia, that merely to question it invites the accusation that one is against "Progress" of all kinds. And yet by what mighty intellects has the Leftist position been assailed in our time! Assailed indeed by the only two poets, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot, who are universally admitted to have attained major rank. The world, said Eliot in the provocative phrase of *After Strange Gods*, is "worm-eaten with Liberal-

ism". Attacking Leftism under its historic mask of "Whiggery", Yeats poured his scorn on

A levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind  
That never looked out of the eye of a saint  
Or out of a drunkard's eye.

Why do the two great poets of our day stand in isolation against the Left? It is a question, assuredly of the first importance, which none of the Leftist choir seems to have considered.

In his prose opinions, as in much of his verse, Yeats appears to stand for Aristocracy against the mob. Eliot in *After Strange Gods* stands for High Church religion against the Liberal "heresy". Consequently both have had hurled at them, by young men who are able to imagine Yeats in a black shirt shouting, "Duce!" and Eliot in a brown shirt crying, "Heil Hitler!", the orthodox swear-word "Fascist". But that is rather too glib a way of disposing of the two outstanding poets of the century.

All theorizing by poets about their work may safely be assumed a rationalization, after the event, of the principles they have discovered in their poetry. And so, in spite of the fact that he took delight in drunkards and scoundrels as well as in aristocratic old ladies and that—"a blind man battering blind men"—he loved humanity in the muddiest ditch it lay in, Yeats discovered that, on the whole, he was against the perfectionists. And, in spite of the fact that the choruses of *Murder in the Cathedral* are as fine a statement of pity for mankind as has ever been written, Eliot discovered that he, too, on the whole, was against the perfectionists. Obviously neither of these men would have been opposed to political reforms that would have benefited the lot of the humanity they loved. To be against the Left need not necessarily imply being against "Progress"; it is, in the case of Yeats and Eliot, to be against a sentimental belief in the immediate perfectibility of mankind by way of slaughtering the middle classes.

But, except as they can be related to the eternal reasser-

tion of realism against sentimentality, contemporary politics have little to do with Yeats's and Eliot's stand against the Left. Rationalize the necessities of their art into what political principles they may please, they stand essentially not for the Right against the Left, not for the Middle against the Left, not for Aristocracy against the Left, not for the Church against the Left, but for Art against the Left. The "suspension of disbelief" always operating to make acceptable artistically works that might politically be unacceptable, there would be no difficulty in approving æsthetically of the verses or novels of the Left if they were written with that "delight", tragic or joyous, which, one agrees with Matthew Arnold, is the ultimate test of the excellence of a work of art.

There have been in our time many such verses, politically debatable, æsthetically convincing. A good example is Cecil Day Lewis's narrative poem "The Loss of the Nabara"; here is a poem about a sea fight written with such spirit that it does not matter in the least that one may regard as childish Geoffrey Grigson's proclamation for the orthodox on the proper attitude to the Spanish imbroglio—"I always judge poetry, first, by its relation to current speech, the language in which one is angry about Spain. . . ." Similarly, the nonsense about "victorious Mussolini" into which Roy Campbell was misled by the orthodoxy of the Right does not prevent one from approving æsthetically of his spirited descriptions of air battles. In spite of his Leftism, Day Lewis saw the heroic in the "Nabara" episode; in spite of his Leftism, Auden achieved a moving acceptance of life, reached Arnold's tragic "delight", in such verse as:

This is my birthday wish for you, as now  
From the narrow window of my fourth-floor room  
I smoke into the night, and watch reflections  
Stretch in the harbour. In the houses  
The little pianos are closed, and a clock strikes.  
And all sway forward on the dangerous flood  
Of history, that never sleeps or dies,  
And, held one moment, burns the hand.

Yet it cannot be denied that the majority of Leftist writing has been neither a compromise with Acceptance nor, like the best of Shelley, a joyful call to revolt, but glum, bitter and defeatist. How exactly the mass of Leftist verse (prose, too) corresponds to that escape from art Matthew Arnold described as merely "painful"—"morbid", "monotonous", "unrelieved by hope", reflecting "a continuous state of mental distress"—is indicated by the following couplet from George Barker, a Leftist who joined Auden in the exodus to America:

How by being miserable for myself I began,  
And now am miserable for the mass of man.

If only the Left had been *vigorous* for the mass of man!

Why is it that the Left was not able to state its case with that hope, that "delight", that passion which alone can carry conviction in a work of art? The answer lies in the quotations from Eliot and Francis Scarfe. If the Pink young men had been sincere and passionate revolutionaries one might have found their work æsthetically acceptable, if not politically. But the Leftist position rested on three great sentimentalities:

That a second world war would be the end of civilization;

That Communist revolution (i.e., the slaughter of the middle classes) was desirable;

That, by means of this bloodbath, the conditions of life upon earth were immediately perfectible.

If the Left did not accept those three propositions, all Auden's repeated Warnings about the war, all Day Lewis's sinister "overtures to Death" and all Stephen Spender's optimisms about "the beautiful generation that shall spring from our sides" were meaningless. The Left did accept those propositions. And yet to assume that the Leftists *believed* what they preached is to convict them of an ignorance of history, a ferocity and a guilelessness beyond credibility. If these bourgeois young men did not at heart desire the bloody liquidation of the bourgeoisie, one must convict them, Left-

ism being indubitably a religion to its devotees, of that "pious insincerity" which Eliot detects in nearly all religious verse; and to Francis Scarfe's plaintive query, "Are we to assume that they isolated themselves from their own class for the fun of the thing and packed their work with revolutionary ideas in which they did not believe?" one must answer a plain Yes. Lacking genuine belief, their work inevitably lacked passion, and that is why the great bulk of it is artistically as well as politically unacceptable.

Auden's departure for America is not a matter for personal comment. He cannot have found the decision easy. But it cannot escape comment as a dramatization of the combined Leftist and Freudian escape carried to its logical extreme. If Leftism was outside war, it was outside life; if it washed its hands of the war, it washed its hands of humanity. If, when mankind was faced with the necessity of accepting heroic values, it had no affirmation to offer, it demonstrated that it had conveyed no genuine illumination in the less dramatic struggle of peace. It had not fought to improve the lot of man, as it professed, but had merely been the plaint of weak spirits against the burden and delight of existence. In plain words, Freudism and Leftism failed mankind in its agony.

Since it has reached its extreme, it would seem that the Leftist escape, like the Freudian, is due for hibernation. Auden's *New Year Letter*, too tortuous as a whole for anyone without access to Auden's private library to follow, spoke out plainly enough of the poet's desire to "show an affirming flame": to turn his back, that may mean, on the false logic that took him out of England and out of the life men have to live. And among the Leftists who stayed in England there has been already a notable change of heart. The outbreak of war found Day Lewis admitting (not a particularly inspiring thing to say to the young men who had to die for England, democracy and liberty; but at least a gesture towards affirmation), "We defend the bad against the worse." Francis Scarfe describes Day Lewis as "the Communist of yesterday, now rather chastened and a member



of the Home Guard", and in Tambimuttu's *Poetry in War-time* he is represented by a fine tribute to his fellow Home Guards, whose lives are "worth a song".

Since Auden is seeking to show his "affirming flame"; since Day Lewis, always attracted to the heroic, has decided that England *as it stands* is worth fighting for and singing about; and since such new writers as Laurence Whistler are surrendering neither to the Freudian nor the Leftist evasions, there is some hope that the middle-age of contemporary English poetry will leave for posterity that heartening image of a heroic age which its callow youth denied.

## “WIFE TO MR MILTON”

IN *Wife to Mr Milton* Robert Graves has performed much the same service for the poet as Charles the Second's officers did for Cromwell when they dug up the dictator's bones and hanged them on a gallows.

Graves is not the first novelist to put the case for Mary Powell, the poet's first wife. A certain Miss Manning, described as “a tall, thin lady with black hair, an aquiline nose and a bright colour; a stout English churchwoman”, published *The Maiden and Married Life of Mary Powell* in 1851 and won high praise for it from the reviewers of the day.

What is known for certain about Milton and the first of the three wives whom he took to his surprisingly adventurous bosom is that he married her, with an abruptness that astonished his acquaintances, when he was 33 and she 16; that her father owed Milton £500; that after a month of marriage Mary came home to her parents; and that, having stayed at home separated from her husband for the duration of the Civil War, she at length rejoined him, bore him four children and died at the age of 26. Everything that history would like to know about Milton's character would possibly be revealed if exactly what happened during that first disastrous month of his married life could be discovered.

The full story is likely to remain a mystery. The speculations of novelists are to be judged on their plausibility, in relation to the known facts, to Milton's writings and to human psychology. Strictly, the question of its historical accuracy or probability is irrelevant to the valuation of Graves's novel as a piece of fiction; it is not, as he points out, submitted as a biography. But, of course, nobody could

resist reading it as biography. Is Graves's Milton the real Milton? Is Miss Manning's?

Since Miss Manning's Milton differs considerably from Graves's it is amusing to compare the two. Comparison, moreover, is made easy because both novelists have used the same set of facts and the same method—Mary Powell telling the story in the first person through the device of a diary.

Before comparing the two stories it is worth while pausing to consider each author's outlook upon the subject. Miss Manning was "a stout English churchwoman": she will be as kind to Milton as she can. Robert Graves, praising Skelton in a poem once, said, "Here is no monstrous Milton": he is unlikely to be idolatrous.

Both Miss Manning and Robert Graves find that the marriage was arranged by the girl's father as a means of evading his £500 debt to the poet. They agree that Milton was genuinely attracted to the girl; and both, though they paint Mary as somewhat taken aback at the proposition (in Miss Manning's account she "fell down in a Swoon at *Father's* feet"), agree that she felt flattered at the offer of a man already distinguished in poetry and scholarship. They agree that Milton's learned conversation bored her. Graves has a scene, missing from the other novel, in which he has Milton making the girl swear she is a virgin before he will kiss her. Milton makes loves pleasantly, if a little pridefully, in Miss Manning's story—"Mr Milton surprised me with a sudden Kiss"—but rather oddly in Graves's version:

Then he said: "After I had seen you for the first time, your hair became an obsession of my mind: for it wreathed itself between my eye and what book soever I studied, though it might be the Holy Bible itself, coming with a gadding or serpentine motion until it choked the sense of my reading. However, when I found experimentally that by no act of ratiocination, nor any ascetic exercise, could I circumvent or remove this strange affection of the eye, and also that only the hair of virgins had the same grand compulsion for me, I was no longer dismayed. I concluded it to be God's will that I should render humble submission to Him, and so to enter into wedlock, wherefrom for certain choice reasons I had conscientiously refrained: for thus I should be able to gloat upon your hair

legitimately, and soon (because of its daily and nightly familiarity) I would no more be plagued with it, in my visionary sense, than I am now by my own ears."

On the private life of Mr and Mrs Milton on their wedding night and subsequently, Miss Manning is as silent as the tomb. She was a genteel soul, and her novel was published in the reign of Queen Victoria. Graves, with a frankness that probably would have made Miss Manning fall in a Swound to the floor, shows Milton extremely gauche as a lover, torn between sensuality and puritanism, ruthlessly selfish, outwardly pompous and inwardly timorous, altogether absurd.

Recovering from her Swound Miss Manning agrees with Graves that Mary's early days in Milton's home were made unhappy by the spectacle of the poet whipping his pupils; also that she was disappointed in London and longed for the countryside again.

Why did Mary go home to her parents at the end of the month? A report that she was unhappy, says Miss Manning, had been made to her parents, and they asked that she should be allowed to visit them. Milton, having looked "surprised and hurte", said that he "would not be soe cruel as to keepe me from a Father I soe dearlie loved", and, at parting, "kissed me most tenderlie agayn and agayn". But in Graves's version Mary is sent home by her husband in disgrace. They have never managed to order their private life to the satisfaction of either; the marriage, in fact, has not been consummated. Mary has recorded her detestation of Milton in her diary and, upon her husband's demanding to see what she has written, has called him, among other things (which Graves mentions), Stinkard, Base Slubberdegullion, Cheesy Plagiarist and Eater of Stinking Beef.

To correct you corporeally as you deserve [says Milton] I cannot, or not without scandal. I cannot mulct you of money, for you receive no wages; you are insensible to gentle chiding; to forgive you would be weakness. I am determined to put you to public shame by sending you back to your father's house at Forest Hill; nor will I receive you to my bosom again until I be assured of your hearty repentance.

Graves and Miss Manning are united in believing that Mary was delighted to be out of her husband's house and back at her father's. They agree on the historical facts of the subsequent events—that Mary remained at Forest Hill during Cromwell's rebellion; that Milton's messenger, sent to retrieve her, was treated with contempt by her family; that Milton began writing angry pamphlets on the desirability of allowing divorce on the ground of what Hollywood calls "incompatibility of temperament"; that there were rumours that Milton would pronounce a divorce against his wife and (a trifle bigamously) marry a lady from Wales, Miss Davis or Davies; that Mary's jealousy and the thought of protecting her Royalist family through her husband's influence with the Roundheads were partly responsible for her decision to return to Milton—but they do not agree on what is all-important, Mary's state of mind.

In Miss Manning's narrative she is truly repentant. "Oh, Heaven, what would I give to see the Skirts of Mr *Milton's* Garments agayn! If Events prove not cross, I shall have Speech of him whom my Soul loveth."

In the Graves novel Mary is "forced to pretend more love for my husband than in truth I felt". She listens to the advice of her mother (a pleasing character in this book, rather like the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*):

"Abase yourself before him; go on your belly like the serpent; eat dust; assuage his wrath with guile. But so soon as ever he has broken his contract with Dr Davis and has received you to his bosom at last, why then you are at liberty to rise up again, springing upon his shoulders and making bloody his sides with your spurs."

And so—"Ho for that nasty, musty, fusty, dusty, rusty City of London, the birthplace of my husband, which I must learn to love, even against my natural inclination."

In *The Maiden and Married Life of Mary Powell* when the repentant wife throws herself at her husband's feet Milton addresses her:

"Much I coulde say to reproach, but will not! Henceforth, let us onlie recall this darke Passage of our deeplie sinfull Lives to quicken

us to *God's* Mercy in affording us this Re-union. Let it deepen our Penitence, enhance our Gratitude."

In Graves's novel, the wife is merely pretending penitence, and Milton is a shade harsher:

"It is God's will that I should forgive you. It comes not easily, so enormous is the wrong that you have done me, so hateful your ingratitude. Yet who can stand against the commandment of God? Therefore: 'Woman, I forgive you!'"

In *The Maiden and Married Life of Mary Powell*, the reconciliation effected, Mary becomes "a joyfuller Wife"; all goes so well that the Milton *ménage* is practically an Olde Englysshe Tea Shoppe. But in *Wife to Mr Milton* Mary "returns to my cat and dog life", tells her husband he has a foul breath (through smoking) and is madder than Nebuchadnezzar, and in return is reproached for a "perverse termagant humour of wrangling and reparteeing" and, during a lapse into English, is called a "pudding-head".

When, following history, Miss Manning records that Milton gave shelter to Mary's parents—impoverished by the war—she paints him as freely and gladly charitable: "We will use Hospitalitie without grudging; and, as for your owne Increase of Cares, I suppose 'twill be but to order two Legs of Mutton insteade of one." In the Graves book, though the fact of giving shelter is admitted, Milton is made to say to the maid who brings news of the arrival of the refugees,

Does your mistress know that they are here? Almost I would rather have Bridewell and Bedlam spew out their scum upon me than that this should happen. Say not a word to her, and I shall send them away quietly, if I may, without her knowledge.

Graves has some extraordinary pages on Milton's behaviour during his wife's pregnancies; his passionate anxiety to breed a warrior son, his methods of ensuring that the infant would be born hardy:

I truly believed him capable of sending me out on a cart into the

fields by Highgate, to be delivered without any midwife's aid under a hedge or in a ditch of stinging nettles—and this not from any unkindness to me, but all for the discipline of his martial son.

On this matter, as on most others of crucial significance, Miss Manning, doubtless for fear of a Fitte, is mute.

Miss Manning's Mary sums up:

His kind and equall Temper, his easie Flow of Mirthe, his Manners unaffectedlie cheerfull; his Voice, musicall; his Person, beautiful; his Habitt, gracefull; his Hospitalities, naturall to him; his Purse, Countenance, Time, Trouble at his Friend's Service; his Devotion, humble; his Forgivenessse, heavenlie!

Graves's lady is less enthusiastic:

Nor have I any just complaint against him, for he never raised a violent hand against me, nor abused me in any other way by which he could be held accountable to God. He also fed and comforted my father and mother and my whole family when they were in distress. He acts righteously, though without love as you and I know love to be. He has a devil, the devil of legality, the same which plagued the Jews to tithe mint and rue, with other follies: but this devil must have his due, or he will howl and run stark mad and hurt both himself and us.

Miss Manning (may her Bones reste in Peace) has a devil also, and the devil is sentimentality. Her happy ending won't wash. After he had married two more wives, Milton retained a bitterness against Mary—certainly against her children, and most likely against her, too, for he wrote in his will:

The portion due to me from Mr Powell, my former wife's father, I leave to the unkind children I had by her, having received no part of it; but my meaning is, they shall have no other benefit of my estate than the said portion and what I have besides done for them, they having been very undutiful to me.

His Forgivenessse, despite Miss Manning, was something less than heavenlie.

But was he quite so harsh a figure as Robert Graves portrays? Graves rather spoils his own case by overloading

it. Not a stone that could be cast is left uncast by one or other of the characters in his novel.

Milton was a great poet, was he? Yes, but he "is more passionately set on literate fame than in love with poetry itself". "Comus" is a lovely thing, is it? Yes,

but he has plucked out the feathers from other poets' wings to make of himself a great immortal Phoenix; yet he has gone about it so cunningly and with such admirable judgment that these plumes glow with rich colour upon his wings and tail, as he preens them, than in their former places.

A great man remains great in spite of borrowings, in spite of psychological topsyturviness (making out a case for the devil in *Paradise Lost* or writing, in "Comus", a naughty poem in defence of chastity); in spite of a fondness for abstractions and an excessive Latinity, does he? Yes, but "Indeed I know not well what I mean. 'Tis the case with me: *Non amo te, Licini, nec possum dicere quare*—I do not love thee, Liciny, but cannot tell the reason why."

Milton wrote a fine, generous elegy for his dead friend Ned King, did he? Yes, but out of envy, not long before his friend died and "Lycidas" was written, he had written a "scurrilous lampoon" in Latin verse about him, someone carps.

Milton steadfastly refused to enter the church because to take the oath would have "perjured him". Then where, someone asks, was his conscience when he took the oath to be admitted to his degrees at Cambridge and Oxford? And then:

It is true that during the war he had written his famous *Areopagitica*, a plea for the freedom of the Press; but almost as soon as the fighting was over he became Assistant Press Censor for the Council of State and helped to enforce a most repressive censorship law.

That last charge is made by Graves personally, in his introduction. Most of the others—that he trained in military exercises before the war, but evaded the fighting; that his interest in reforming the divorce laws was based on his desire to rid himself of one wife and to marry another; that,



in effect, he was cowardly, morally inconsistent and ignoble in his motives as well as arrogant, selfish and harshly puritanic—are made by Mary Powell: by an embittered wife, that is. It is in character for her to make such allegations; some of them are historical fact; in all of them there is an element of probability; nevertheless, an impression persists of the author's overloading a case.

If the reader is not wary he will even find himself sympathizing with Mary in her vehement objections to Milton's smoking. He will find himself sympathizing with Mary throughout: whereas, if Graves's conjecture is true that she was in love with another man all her life through, her whole case against her husband falls to the ground. The story does not read very convincingly; but if it were true, Mary was a criminal idiot to marry Milton, and he could hardly be blamed for the failure of the marriage.

That Milton was an unpleasant example of the puritan husband can hardly be doubted. Even making allowances for a period in which autocracy was much in fashion, it was hardly amiable to maintain

. . . God's universal law  
Gave to man despotic power  
Over his female in due awe,  
Nor from that right to part an hour.

Adam is more than a little arrogant in his attitude to Eve; and Milton gave much of himself away when in "Samson Agonistes" his hero cried out in bitterness and contempt,

And broken by a peal of words—O weakness!—  
Gave up my fort of silence to a woman.

It is difficult to like Milton. It is difficult not to agree that Graves's picture is, on the whole, justifiable. The case should have been put more temperately; some human balance should have been brought in; some of the charges are trivial: but this is more or less the real Milton.

The real Milton, as seen by his wife.

A different mouthpiece, a different approach might have

done something to justify the ways of Milton to man: for Milton, even if you don't like his style or his mind, was undoubtedly a genius and a wife isn't necessarily the most impartial judge to sum up on a genius.

Milton, like any other man of his calibre in the arts, was a man governed by a demon, the demon of his work. Contemporary psychology would certainly say that his blindness was self-inflicted, or inflicted by his demon, a wall to shut him off from the world and force him to his work of creation. All the flaws of his character might similarly be regarded as necessary for the task he had to do. Byron and Shelley had a merrier way of wrecking women's lives, but they wrecked them just the same. The novelist dealing with Milton should approach the subject as Thomas Mann worked with the figure of Goethe in *Lotte in Weimar*: a study of the ruthlessness of genius.

And it is no small figure the novelist would have to portray. Milton notoriously identified himself with his Satan, a rebel violent with the conviction of injustice, magnificent in his anger and tragic even in his self-pity. The Samson of "Samson Agonistes" is more directly still a self-portrait. Raging against his enemies, raging against women, raging against his blindness and tormented once more by a sense of cosmic injustice, Samson so hates the whole of creation that he brings the universe crashing to destruction.

Samson is an image of hate; but a hate so gigantic becomes a kind of black affirmation of life; affirming by its violent splendour the very thing it seeks to destroy, the splendour of human passion. It is as futile to niggle at Milton as it would be to snipe at that equally unamiable hater of life, Dean Swift.

## IN DEFENCE OF ARNOLD WALL

IN an issue of *Meanjin Papers* there is an article by Allen Curnow on "Aspects of New Zealand Poetry". Within its limits, as a survey of the work of D'Arcy Cresswell, R. A. K. Mason and A. R. D. Fairburn, it is valuable; but in its exclusion of Arnold Wall, it is misleading.

Misleading, because Mr Curnow is specifically interested in poets in whose work New Zealand is made articulate; poets who, in contrast to the early versifiers, accept the New Zealand scene as their natural environment, using with equal ease the images of the imported and the native trees and birds, speaking as New Zealanders for New Zealand: and nobody has ever been more at home in New Zealand than Arnold Wall.

Wall has a new book out, *About Our Birds*, and surely these pieces about tuis and blackbirds, starlings and bell-birds, keas and sparrows are exactly what Mr Curnow likes to find in New Zealand poetry, "the strange new speech of a poetry coming to be her own and already contributing to her self-awareness". Here are "rocks, great peaks, icefields and everlasting snows" where the kea, if he chose, could move in "the vastest orbit of all created things"; here is the tui disapproving of "pakeha birds"; here is the sea:

And the gulls like foam flying,  
Hunggrily crying,  
Their snowy wings  
Reflecting the green light of the wave  
In the underside;

and the city:

On the fringe of the city  
The warbler, hark,

Loiters in gardens, threads the shrubberies,  
Haunts the park;  
Through the roaring of trams,  
And newsboys' calls,  
His sweet, sad, semi-toned sibilance  
Rises and falls;

and the bush where the bellbird learned his song:

Where could he learn it, where could it be found?  
Where waters drip from the ferny rocks, we wonder,  
Into a shadowy pool, with a pearly sound,  
An airy bubble of music bursting asunder;

and, in the most successful of all these bird-pieces, "All Before Them", something gay and free and shining that evokes all the charm of the settled country, perhaps an Auckland suburb, perhaps a country road with the telegraph wires over the boxthorn and a field of dry thistles somewhere handy:

I've just seen them,  
And paused to admire—  
Three goldfinches,  
Mr, Mrs and Friend,  
Perching on a wire  
With a couple of inches  
Or so between them,  
In the dawn grey and cold,  
Gossiping away  
In their scarlet and gold  
Uniforms brave and gay,  
And itching to spend  
Their new day;  
By-and-bye,  
Scared of me,  
In a flash off they fly  
Down the wind, careless and free,  
And they don't know  
Where they'll go  
Or what they'll do,  
And neither do I,  
Nor do you.

Arnold Wall should not be taken lightly because he writes lightly. Nor should it be considered somehow improper for a poet to have a sense of humour.

On the surface the goldfinch poem is a pretty little trifle about birds. But, also, it is obviously a poem about the joy of being alive, a laughing defiance of fate. Why shouldn't it be taken as symptomatic of the spirit of New Zealand? New Zealand doesn't know where it is going, this poem says; Wall doesn't know; nobody knows: but how splendid to be New Zealand and to be going gaily into the future. One could say just that in a thousand lines, learned lines, earnest lines, gloomy lines or dramatic lines, and it is important that long poems should be written; but the goldfinch, the lyrical spark of light, has its own importance.

And particularly is the lyric important when, as in Wall's case, it is not a solitary flight but one of many, a bird in a whole sky of birds: for Wall's output of short poems is prodigious. Taken as a body they may well amount to the most important poetic statement yet made in New Zealand.

Only three or four of the pieces in *About Our Birds*—"All Before Them", "Conflict of Laws", "The Antique World"—have much individual merit as poetry; the rest is pleasant light verse—pleasant verse, considered in isolation in this book, but something more than that when it is related to the whole body of Wall's poetry: part of the statement of a rare personality, part of an important picture of the New Zealand scene, of New Zealand life and of the New Zealand spirit.

The centennial *Letters and Art in New Zealand* ignored Arnold Wall completely. Mr Curnow follows M. H. Holcroft's *The Waiting Hills* in choosing to be "silent in these pages about the gnomic verse of Arnold Wall". Because Mr Holcroft has tagged the label "gnomic" on to Wall's poetry, Allen Curnow is able to exclude him from consideration. Possibly that is justifiable within the limits of his essay: but every New Zealand critic seems to find some justification for evading consideration of this writer, who has at

least arguable claims to the title of chief of New Zealand poets.

If it were not for the fact that Wall's is distinctively and strongly New Zealand poetry, this evasion of his impact because he is "gnomic" would be rather like an Australian evasion of Hugh McCrae's work because it is "romantic", "lyrical" or not specifically Australian in imagery. But Wall's work *is* distinctively New Zealand in colour and spirit. He is simply a "gnomic" New Zealander. It cannot even be said that he is not in accord with those writers who are, sensibly, making a cult of New Zealand imagery. Does he not make a point of writing about "our" birds?

Why, then, does New Zealand criticism choose to be silent about him? There seem to be two reasons: his style is not specifically "contemporary" and he has a sense of humour—"the ship's cat" he called it once, knowing well that serious poetic ships are not supposed to carry anything so undignified or so much alive as a cat.

Neither of these excuses for disregarding him is valid. His style is neither in the modern fashion nor in the Victorian; though possibly not capable of the greatest heights, it is individual, timeless, a true style as distinct from the false style of fashion. He should be honoured for it, not disregarded. And as for the ship's cat—laughter really is the most sensible and serious comment anybody can make on life; and it has not yet become an indictable offence for a cat to look at a king.

## NORMA DAVIS'S POETRY

NORMA DAVIS'S *Earth Cry* is a quiet, unfashionable, essentially rural poetry, and therefore it has never been taken seriously by critics looking for the astonishing.

I kneel and thrust my fingers in the earth,  
Scooping the brown bush mould up, till I hold  
It in my hands, a miser with her gold.

There is the image; a handful of Tasmanian earth. A passage from Hazlitt's "character" of Wordsworth is extraordinarily apt:

To the author of the *Lyrical Ballads* nature is a kind of home; and he may be said to take a personal interest in the universe. There is no image so insignificant that it has not in some mood or other found the way into his heart: no sound that does not awaken the memory of other years—

... To him the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

The daisy looks up to him with sparkling eye as an old acquaintance: the cuckoo haunts him with sounds of early youth not to be expressed: a linnet's nest startles him with boyish delight: an old withered thorn is weighed down with a heap of recollections: a grey cloak, seen on some wild moor, torn by the wind, or drenched in the rain, afterwards becomes an object of imagination to him: even the lichens on the rock have a life and a being in his thoughts.

He has described all these objects in a way and with an intensity of feeling that no one else had done before him, and has given a new view or aspect of nature. He is in this sense the most original poet now living, and the one whose writings could the least be spared: for they have no substitute elsewhere. The vulgar do not read them; the learned, who see all things through books, do not understand them, the great despise, the fashionable may ridicule them: but the author has created himself an interest in the heart of the retired and lonely student of nature, which can never die. Persons of this class will still continue to feel what he has felt.

It is quite possible that the compliment of those two concluding sentences may be passed on, without modification, to Norma Davis's verses. She is not Wordsworth. Though she is, in a sense, the core of Wordsworth—one does not have to wade through twenty pages of dull moralizing and incredibly bad versification to find the line "Clothed in the withering sunshine of the fern" and all autumn in it—Norma Davis lacks the great man's stature and his depth. Yet Wordsworth would have liked her verses. Clare would have liked and perhaps envied them. Edmund Blunden in our own time would like them.

And in Australia, if not elsewhere, "the retired and lonely student of nature" is going to read them for a long time to come. They are the best nature poetry we have had. Somebody else may—though it's doubtful—have brought the echidna into Australian poetry; but nobody has such a passion for nature as to *become* the creature and, with magnificent unself-consciousness, share its meal of ants:

... I don the dark thorned mail  
 Echidnas wear, and quest among the peeled  
 Bark of white gums, or thrust in glee behind  
 Old logs that mildew like a rotting rind,  
 Crunching with joy the spicy ants I find.

It would be hard to find any other poet who is so simply and wholly *at home* in Australia as Norma Davis.

Wordsworth made the cuckoo and the daisy real to England. In effect, he created the cuckoo and the daisy, for they had been dead since Shakespeare's day. Norma Davis has created not only the echidna, but "the guttering candles of ripe broom", "grey wattle moths", "the bright-eyed wren with hood of blue", the snake with its "white throat pillowed on a sun-soaked stone", the "tree-frogs singing down in sandy dunes", the "shy scrub-pigeons beating through the brush", "the brown quail, silent as water", autumnal grass "bleached to the blondness of binder-twine", the logs that lie in black pools in the bush like crocodiles with "blunt snouts darkly sunken in backwash holes", the leaf-light and



leaf-brown hawk that "braves the blue avalanches of the air", plovers that skirl like bagpipes, blackwoods that "squat in a ring like tribesmen making magic", the scrub leech clinging to the fern, the breaking buds of spring whose mystery humbles the soul, green grass that was "made before man", black rocks that look like fishermen's oilskins, the berries of the snake-bush, rosellas "red as wild pea blossoms", cockatoos like a pall of white smoke, "gay fans of fungus", lonely tracks where birds make their dust-baths, a log fence with "yellow sunshine warming its old wood", frost like a "scorpion", scrub bandicoots "like fairy swine", the bittern with cool mud oozing between his toes, rabbits on a wet day that "cling to their burrows with a cat's distaste for wet", sandy field-mice nibbling at the yellow roots of the briar, wild tussock country where "brown old barges of banksias" drift into limbo, sheep country where once the fugitive convict lay sweating with terror, the old tree where the wild bees nest, the platypus that rides the water so silently that the stream might be oil and he "a handful of uprooted grasses", native hens in the tea-tree, possums dreaming the day away and bats sleeping in the boles of dead trees like "little ripe pears of wintry brown", cold earth found to be as warm with life as if cattle had been sleeping on it—the creatures of the Tasmanian bush, the trees and flowers of the bush, its scents and its colours, its storms and its sunshine, its threat and its loveliness, its mysterious and eternally enchanting self. In fact, at a suitable distance after the First Cause, Norma Davis has created Tasmania.

It is rather a relief to find that she has not attempted to formulate any definite philosophy out of her love of the earth. One can read these poems with the same pleasure as one takes a walk in the country on a sunny day, without constantly being reminded, as in Wordsworth, that the daisy is a regular church-goer. These are the images of pantheism without much of its philosophy. And yet, in spite of one's pleasure, there is something missing.

Unrelated to human life, unconcerned in the main with

the drama of man on the earth, Norma Davis's poems are not in the great stream of poetry, but only a tributary to it. And as with the thought, so with the style. Often faulty, often very beautiful, with a fine precision of phrase, they are seldom finished works of art, but rather like a series of extracts from one long poem about Tasmania never worked into a co-ordinated whole. They contribute nothing new to the technique of poetry. They are out of the great stream. Yet Hazlitt's lonely student, if no one else, will keep them alive long after most of the more pretentious poems of contemporary fashion have been forgotten. Here is a poetry not of words but of things: a poetry of earth, and earth endures. "Persons of this class will continue to feel what she has felt."

## ELDERS OF THE TRIBE

WHEN, near the end of his life, W. B. Yeats declared himself to be a "wild, wicked old man", his father's ghost must have jumped on the coals for joy; for all his life J. B. Yeats was constantly exhorting the poet to cultivate "wickedness" in his life and in his art.

Had you stayed with me and not left me for Lady Gregory, and her friends and associations, you would have loved and adored concrete life, for which, as I know, you have a real affection. What would have resulted? Realistic and poetical plays—poetry in closest and most intimate union with the positive realities and complexities of life.

And that is the world that waits, so far in vain, its poet. I have always hoped and do still hope that your wife may do for you what I would have done.

Not the idea but the game of life should have been your pre-occupation, as it was Shakespeare's and the old English writers', notably the kinglike Fielding.

Poetry, Yeats the elder insisted, must be "popular": not in the cheap sense of the term, but in the broad and noble sense in which Shakespeare and Fielding are popular. The writer must take his material direct from life, without apology, without prejudice, without the belittling puritanism of the reformer. He believed that W. B. Yeats was capable of apprehending the great comedy and re-creating it in his art:

Never are you happier and never more felicitous in words than when in your conversation you describe life and comment on it. But when you write poetry you as it were put on your dress coat and shut yourself in and forget what is vulgar to a man in a dress coat.

Probably you will have a long life, in which there will be many revolutions and epochs. It is my belief that some day you will write a play of real life in which poetry will be the inspiration, as propaganda is of Bernard Shaw's plays.

As far as W. B. Yeats's plays went the prophecy never came true. They never got down to life, and consequently never quite reached hell and heaven. But, as Joseph Hone points out in a footnote to one of the father's letters, the poet did strike reality in his later ballads, which he hoped would be sung in taverns. Like his shiftless and tolerant parent, "the best conversationalist in New York"—a prodigal father always on the brink of painting a masterpiece and continually borrowing money from his son to keep him going until his luck turned—W. B. Yeats did become a "wild, wicked old man" in the end. And that is why he is a great poet.

This creed of "wickedness"—which really is the creed of the love of life—is the theme not only of *J. B. Yeats: Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats, and Others* but of John Cowper Powys's series of essays *The Art of Growing Old*. Both are rebels against the puritan orthodoxy of the age which, disguised in a score of masks from the New Order to Surrealism, seeks to belittle life and to fetter the arts. Says Powys, what does the ordinary man really want in the years to come?

He wants to enjoy himself *now*. And when we come to the nature of the enjoyment he wants now, it is *not* to possess the proud puritanical satisfaction of feeling that everyone is being compelled to have the same austere proletarian taste for proletarian art, proletarian drama, proletarian dancing, proletarian furniture and proletarian philosophy.

What does he want then? He wants a thousand overtones of the feeling of rising above all levels! He wants overtones of variety, overtones of exciting differences, overtones of fancies, whims, caprices, peculiarities, hobbies, cults, manias, specialisations, eccentricities, *stunts!*

Says J. B. Yeats:

It seems to me that one of the foolishhest ideas is people's habit of constantly looking for a *complete* man, a kind of nonsense handed down from Goethe. What we want is incomplete men. I like all qualities to be in excess, or rather that each person should be a specialist. Complete, well-governed men have their value, no doubt; they make good clerks, look well after routine, etc.

Powys, of course, with his bizarre personality and his frenzied worship of Nature, is just the sort of specialist Yeats had in mind: a fanatical pantheist who can emerge from his entranced contemplation of sticks and stones and mud to advise elderly people to go to Rabelais for spiritual comfort. A nature-lover first—a specialist; and then a lover of all life. And a strange man, an oddity, a man of “excess”. His recipe-in-chief for happiness in old age is to read some difficult work, preferably in a foreign tongue.

By brooding over memories—distilling the essence of experience—and by laying the mind open to those intimations of immortality which come in “sideways”, he says, from the natural world, old age is able to practise a technique of enjoyment.

Enjoyment of this particular kind, a mixture of pleasure and inspiration, can be extracted from literature as well as from the contemplation of nature or the past: but only from a particular kind of literature.

Now it is clear that in the perusal of an exciting story, of whose plot and conclusion we are totally ignorant, the mind is fully occupied. It is I fancy very rare—indeed almost impossible—for these paradisiac moments of purged memory to interrupt the reading of a “detective” or “mystery” story.

Old age wants something quite different from this. It wants to “loaf and invite its soul”; it wants to expatiate and brood and ponder; it wants to indulge in happy wandering thoughts. Above all it craves and demands in its reading a very special and peculiar sensation—the sensation of *life's continuity*.

Rabelais, Powys suggests. Shakespeare; Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*; Milton's poems and Sir Thomas Browne's prose; *Tristram Shandy*, Lamb, Keats; Scott, Jane Austen and Dickens. Even these English classics—though Burton should be thorny enough for the most pernicky of ancients—are not quite difficult enough for him. Homer is the man; so that old age may learn with Odysseus that life is “a song for the men to come”. And Homer is to be read in the original Greek by a reader who has never learned the language: “I am certain that he will not get the subtler and

rarer advantages of his leisure until he *habitually* turns the pages of that unique epitome of human civilisation, Liddell and Scott's Greek Lexicon!"

At a time when the Freudian view of life, or at least Jung's modification of it, is almost universally accepted, so that the love of nature is understood as a yearning for the Great Mother, a sublimation of the sex urge, Powys submits a seemingly fantastic theory that a man taking a walk in the country is not "loving" nature but "eating" it. Nonsense? It seems so at first glance. But he goes back with the Freudians to the image of the suckling infant and points out that the child is concerned not with love but with food.

At a time when science is generally considered the hope of the world, he sees the scientist as man's enemy: not only because science dehumanizes humanity, but because, setting up its mathematical Absolute, it degrades the universe.

At a time when most critics preach that the writer has a duty—always a reformist one—to his own times, Powys, finding something to approve in a writer of whom Yeats consistently disapproves, quotes Goethe to the effect that he was tied to his own age not by his strength but by his weakness.

At a time when "wicked old men" are still being blamed for causing wars, poverty and the rest of the troubles of mankind, he points out that the recent conflict has been caused chiefly by the wicked young men of Germany and Japan.

At a time when the pink young men of the democracies are planning their post-war paradises, Powys turns to an old Englishman and an old Chinaman for a discussion of what man really wants in the years to come:

He does *not* want to go on toiling day and night, with devoted assiduity, at "piece-time" pay in peace-time, in order that the next generation, or the generation after the next, shall have time to enjoy itself.

The ordinary man, he submits, "wants to have his own money in his pocket to spend in his own way".

There is something irresistibly comic in the spectacle of these valiant ancients outraging the orthodoxies of the age and trying to convince earnest-minded youth of its right to gaiety. But it is not the ancients who are ludicrous.

Powys is not likely to be popular in his mysticism of the countryside. This age lives in a flat. For every reader of *The Glastonbury Romance*—the strangest and perhaps the most profound of contemporary novels—there are a hundred for cheaper and easier works; and probably ten readers for more obviously difficult works, such as James Joyce's, Pound's and Eliot's, for this book, too, "comes in sideways".

He is not likely to be popular—at least with the intellectuals; he writes on the margin of contemporary life, but he does not write nonsense: "Yes, the truth is that unless old men possess some deep interior life of their own they are almost bound to hang like millstones round the necks of their children and their children's children."

J. B. Yeats writes such profound good sense that one would like to quote his book in its entirety. If it were not for the fact that such a pleasing self-portrait emerges from the letters, extracts from them might well have been printed as a book of aphorisms, of the first importance to contemporary criticism.

### On painting:

I make a distinction between artists who bring with them what I call full minds, and those who have empty minds; the latter take naturally to art schools, but the others keep away from art schools. Ingres seems to me head and chief of those who have empty minds—great artist though he was; Turner and Hogarth belong to the other category, and, I should say, Monet. All modern artists, or almost all, are studio bred.

A practical purpose runs through all Hogarth's pictures—but his artistic sense forces him to paint his harlots of a tender grace and his men, however wicked, still human, as if he would persuade Justice to break her sword.

## On poetry:

I would call oversensitiveness, too high an ideal of execution, etc., mere indolence. It is much easier to polish and perfect work which one has already done and in which one is already fully interested than to go on to fresh enterprises.

Ideas in poetry must never be expressed, they can only be implied.

It is quite possible to be lyrical and not poetical—to be a poet it is necessary first of all to be a man.

Swinburne's roots strike nowhere, he grows in light soil . . . . He was a starved personality—nothing came from him but miracles, beautiful flowers of technique.

## On the American "wisecrack":

In America people talk either to say or to listen to *memorable* things—but there is no atmosphere. When artists who are congenial to each other meet, they don't say memorable things, neither do husband and wife when they love each other.

## On the theatre:

I have read two volumes of Bernard Shaw. How naturally and inevitably he rises out of Irish Evangelical life (not Belfast). The Protestant *saute qui peut* trying for religion and finding it in socialism; also he is still the evangelical superior person.

Theatrical audiences are bent on amusement. There is something about the theatre, something inevitable when people come together *in holiday mood* and *in crowds*, which makes deductive purpose and moral effort an irrelevancy and ridiculous. That is why English writers approach the theatre shorn of half their strength—and that is why we, the mere Irish, having escaped Puritanism, and so bent on making pleasure a serious concern, succeed where they fail and write the plays. At the theatre moral purpose is a stranger and unwelcome, and love which cares nothing for moral distinctions finds itself at home. There is a lot of love in Bernard Shaw, notwithstanding his long residence in England, and his own conscious efforts to strangle it, and that is the part of his plays which we like and we remember: unmoral love which is always whispering its doubts as to the Ten Commandments, and as to rules and laws generally.

## On literature in general:

My complaint is that literature has gone over to the side of the schoolmaster and that it used to be carried on by the boys themselves.



· On life in general:

We love people because of their faults. Uplifting thins the blood.

A magnificently wicked old man! And the style has an undeniable purity and sweetness. This is not always the case; the letters are casually enough written, and some, particularly the early ones, were hardly worth printing. But there are always the flashes of brilliance: a style like W. B. Yeats's, only warmer.

Powys, of course, has few graces of style. That is another reason why he has never been widely accepted as a champion of the unorthodox. Sometimes powerful and always—because of rather than in spite of its faults—impressive, his writing is a maze of difficulty. With its strings of hyphens, its weird, pseudo-scientific terminology, its exclamation marks and its italics, it is like a great rubbish dump: there's treasure in it for the searcher, but there's a great deal of junk and rusty barbed wire. In fact, it is near enough to the ideal of "a difficult work in a foreign language" to be eminently suitable reading for old age.

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## THE LIFE OF A "FIEND"

"His manners are 99 in 100 singularly repulsive," said Coleridge; "brow-hanging, shoe-contemplative, *strange*."

His smile, said Mary Shelley, "was like a sunbeam illuminating the most melancholy of ruins, lightning that assured you on a dark night of the identity of a friend's ruined and deserted abode".

"I looked on him personally as little better than an incarnate fiend," said Patmore before he met him.

This was William Hazlitt, whose sombre and stormy life Catherine Macdonald Maclean has told in *Born Under Saturn*. Even Charles Lamb, the most tolerant of men—and the only literary man of his period who seems to have attained balance of mind—found Hazlitt awkward company. Lamb took Hazlitt to meet a couple of girls, and Hazlitt "sat and frowned blacker and blacker, indignant that there should be such a thing as Youth and Beauty. He tore me away before supper in perfect misery and owned he could not bear young girls; they drove him mad."

Although she strives nobly, and laboriously, after detachment, Catherine Macdonald Maclean has not quite achieved it. She is biased in Hazlitt's favour in his quarrels with Wordsworth and Coleridge, and does not quote the most fiendish of his utterances on the two poets, which is to be found at the conclusion of one of his "characters" of Coleridge:

It was a misfortune to any man of talent to be born at the latter end of the last century. . . . The flame of liberty, the light of intellect, was to be extinguished with the sword—or with slander, whose edge is sharper than the sword. . . . The philosophers, the dry, abstract reasoners, submitted to this reverse pretty well, and armed themselves with patience "as with triple steel", to bear discomfiture, persecution and disgrace. But the poets, the creatures

of sympathy, could not stand the frowns both of king and people. They did not like to be shut out when places and pensions, when the critic's praises and the laurel wreath were about to be distributed. They did not stomach being sent to *Coventry*, and Mr Coleridge sounded a retreat for them by the help of casuistry and a musical voice.

To understand the full monstrosity of this attack it is necessary to know exactly what Wordsworth and Coleridge had done. Both had welcomed the French Revolution as a new birth of Liberty in the world. They saw the rebirth of Liberty degenerate into the Terror, they saw the rise of Napoleon, and they decided that they had been mistaken. England, with all its faults, was the true home of Liberty.

Neither of them was in the least ashamed of this change of front; though Miss Maclean, in company with Hazlitt, accepts the conventional view that they had reason to be. On the contrary, both made public statements giving their reasons, Wordsworth in verse and Coleridge in both verse and prose. "All Governments," Miss Maclean expounds Coleridge, "to a certain extent mangle Liberty, and this is unavoidable, because the corruption of Governments is only the visible sign of corruption lurking in the governed."

All Governments *are* bad, and it was hardly shameful in Coleridge to have perceived that Napoleon was not a saint. "It is an accursed thing," said Wordsworth, "to look on prosperous tyrants with a dazzled eye."

Confronted with the Terror and with Bonaparte, the two poets turned to what Hazlitt called "the mean side" of conservatism and patriotism. Hazlitt, meanwhile, had refused to modify his opinions, even when the plain facts made them nonsensical. He had decided at the beginning that Napoleon was the incarnation of the Revolution, Liberty herself, and nothing that the Emperor said or did could shake him. If Napoleon could say that he would sacrifice the whole people of Italy sooner than lose a single French soldier, he was still the champion of humanity. If he brought the terrors and miseries of invasion to the Russian people he was nonetheless their "deliverer"; and "the hag Despotism

was still the hag Despotism, even when she flaunted herself over Moscow *dressed in a robe of flame-coloured taffeta*".

With what seems to us today—until we consider the antics of the contemporary Left—fantastic blindness, Hazlitt stuck to his (and Napoleon's) guns. "It is not to be believed how the death of Napoleon affected him," said Benjamin Haydon. "He seemed prostrated in mind and body, he walked about unwashed, unshaved, hardly sober by day and always intoxicated by night."

This was not the detached admiration of Byron for a colourful mass-murderer. Hazlitt (and Miss Maclean seems to be with him) thoroughly disapproved of Byron. It was fanaticism.

Even so, there was nothing dishonourable—if nothing sensible—in it. It was a legitimate point of view. Hazlitt was passionately sincere. Where he went unforgivably wrong, where he became a "fiend", was in refusing to admit that Wordsworth and Coleridge—in their much more sensible opinions—were also sincere.

It is easy enough to follow the conventional Freudian trail to the source of Hazlitt's political evangelism and its corollary, political fury. And, at that source, one finds also the origin of that hatred for life to which Lamb's anecdote of the visit to the young girls bears witness. He was a puritan, maimed by the narrow orthodoxy of his childhood. In his dark satanic strength, in his self-torment as the desire for life warred with his fear and hate of it, in his pitiable-ness and, above all, in his conviction of a personal injustice done him by the universe—his incessant *blaming* of life for being what it is—he reminds one of Milton. Life was not what he had been led to believe; he himself was not what he had been led to believe. It "put him beside himself".

Like his politics, his personal life was a dance of fury. He approached his first marriage, to the gay and charming Miss Stoddart, with "repugnance and a sort of fatal fascination", driven by "the very fear of the event".

Before that there had been the mysterious "Keswick incident", which, despite Catherine Maclean's painstaking

analysis, remains a mystery. Something, nobody knows what, happened between Hazlitt and a country girl that led to his being driven from the district: he was man-handled, narrowly escaped ducking, was pursued by men on horseback and was helped to escape by Wordsworth, who, with Coleridge, was cold to him from that day onwards.

The essence of the matter seems to be that Hazlitt lost his temper with the girl; his "fiend's" temper. Lamb treated it as a joke. Wordsworth gossiped about it, and, according to Frederic Wordsworth Haydon, the story "combined such a union of the fiendish, the ludicrous and the sublime as not to be surpassed in any story ever told of Hazlitt".

Here again Catherine Maclean subtly colours the story in favour of Hazlitt.

She attacks Wordsworth for gossiping, and both him and Coleridge for lack of charity. Probably the two poets did err on the side of conventional morality. Neither was exactly a Pecksniff, but they both were able to forget their own strayings with an ease which today seems hypocritical. The professional pietism of Dr Johnson still governed public manners.

Nevertheless it was asking a great deal of human nature for Wordsworth to keep silent on the subject all his life long or for Coleridge to refrain from comment, especially when Hazlitt had accused both of prostituting the cause of Freedom. Crabb said Hazlitt "whipped" the woman; and if that was the truth—nobody knows—Wordsworth and Coleridge were hardly to be blamed for disapproving.

Hazlitt was certainly to prove later in life—"I am not mad, but my heart is so; and raves within me fierce and untamable, like a panther in its den"—that love took him like a frenzy. What he sought and what he got from women was torment. The story of his love for Sarah Walker, the one great passion of his life (which Miss Maclean tells very well), is Shakespearean in its tragic intensity. Knowing, as he must have known, that the girl did not really care a rap for him, he hounded her till she turned and

broke him. He sought punishment, and he got it. He sought to be hated, and he was. In itself it is a pitiable and terrible story; though it is always to be remembered that Hazlitt was a literary man and that he got a book out of it.

As contradictory a character as ever was seen on earth—a lover who did everything he knew would make his girl hate him; a puritan who haunted the brothels and the pubs; a democrat who worshipped Napoleon; a pacifist who raged at the "hired scribbler" sitting "secure and self-satisfied" at his desk, sending thousands of his fellow-countrymen to death "with a venomous word or a lie that looks like truth" and yet who, when the French made peace, "scorned them for submitting"; a man benevolent in theory who could see other theorists so clearly as to say, "I believe in the theoretical benevolence and practical malignity of man", yet never could see himself; a lover of mankind who cried out, "Hatred alone is immortal"—Hazlitt can only be understood as a man who demanded to be hated.

Only when he had piled up enough hatred on his head could he turn to life with a smile of love "like a sunbeam in the most melancholy of ruins". Only when he had attacked them as men could he praise Wordsworth and Coleridge as writers. Only when he had attacked himself and his friends like a fiend could he turn and write like an angel.

Why a man should be so driven, the gods alone know. His puritan upbringing is not enough to account for it. The clue, perhaps, lies in the fact that he wrote with great difficulty; with torture, at first. He had a fighter's heart—his essay on "The Fight" bears witness—and he needed the stimulus of battle. Art, he says in his great essay on poetry, "has its source and groundwork in the common love of strong excitement".

It is a fitting paradox that he should live today—apart from his interest as a character—chiefly by those writings which contradict everything he believed. He was a puritan, but he lives for his praise of Rabelais. He condemned Cole-

ridge and Wordsworth as men, and he lives for his praise of their poetry. He was a political fanatic, yet he lives for saying—admirably if not, alas, quite accurately—"Homer's poetical world has outlived Plato's philosophical Republic." Life hurt him, would not obey his rules, and he hated it; yet he lives for his affirmation of the whole of life, its "evil" as well as its "good":

The rest is mere oblivion, a dead letter: for all that is worth remembering in life is the poetry of it. Fear is poetry, hope is poetry, love is poetry, hatred is poetry; contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, despair or madness are all poetry.

"Man," he added, "is a poetical animal." The phrase is a better self-portrait than rumour's "fiend".

On the whole, Catherine Maclean has presented this "poetical animal" well. Her style seems made, not born—a mixture of Carlyle and Hazlitt with too many affectations, "nays" and "perchances" and "a-preparings" and ejaculations such as "William of Wem! a poison-thorny way lies before thee!" She makes hard work both of writing and of analysing character. The book is unconsciously biased. But both the drama of Hazlitt's life and the general picture of the period are very well done. Nay, excellently.

## HOW TO READ TOM COLLINS

MR SHEAN. Of course, Mr Gallagher, you have read Tom Collins's *Such Is Life*.

MR GALLAGHER. I have read Lawson, I have read Paterson, I have read *On Our Selection* and Louis Stone's *Jonah*; I have even read that good man Ted Dyson, whom nearly everybody has forgotten; but never have I read Tom Collins.

SHEAN. Though the *Bulletin* published him in 1903, and there was an abridged edition edited by Vance Palmer in 1937, he has never been generally available. But now that (in a somewhat belated celebration of the centenary of his birth in 1843) Angus and Robertson have published him in full with the recommendation of the Commonwealth Fund, you will, of course, read him at once.

GALLAGHER. Are you suggesting, Mr Shean, that it is my duty to read Tom Collins?

SHEAN. I would as soon suggest to a bullock that it is its duty to eat grass. Professors, critics and others of the depressed classes may have to read books from a sense of duty; but you and the bullock, you graze where you will for the pleasure of it.

GALLAGHER. Nobody ever invited me before to read Tom Collins for the fun of him.

SHEAN. Come, Mr Gallagher, literary gentlemen have been talking about him for years.

GALLAGHER. Literary gentlemen have been talking about his politics. I refer you to an article by Mr Hartley Grattan in the *Australian Quarterly* of September, 1937. The article is nine and half pages in length, and eight and a half pages of it are devoted to Collins's politics. "It is, in fact," he concludes, "a book full of 'dangerous thoughts', and for



that reason not least a (adj.) fine book for the present generation."

SHEAN. I trust, Mr Gallagher, you do not object to a book full of (adj.) dangerous thoughts about socialism?

GALLAGHER. Not at all, Mr Shean; but it is not a true recommendation for a work of literature to say that its political morals are impeccable. You might as well ask me to read (adj.) "Hansard".

SHEAN. I will let you into a great secret: Tom Collins wrote about bullockies because they amused him. Tom Collins the man had his political beliefs and sympathies like the rest of us; but Tom Collins the novelist was as ruthless as Dickens. Dickens the man, you will remember, was always wanting to reform mankind and to abolish the slums; but Dickens the novelist got all his best characters and all his best fun out of wicked people who lived in the slums. I mention Mrs Gamp; I mention Jerry Cruncher. Tom Collins the man may well have wanted to improve the conditions of his bullockies; Tom Collins the writer takes a delight in their misfortunes. Does he weep when some arrogant squatter chases the poor bullocky from his property? He roars with laughter.

GALLAGHER. You give me new hope. If you can prove to me that, by social and political standards, Tom Collins was as wicked a man as Dickens, I shall really try to read him.

SHEAN. Let us turn to *Such Is Life*, page 14. "A low groan from Bum's mare followed the heavy stroke of the ruffian's spurs. 'Some of you other (fellows) keep roun' that side,' said he; 'I'll go this road. Up! you Red Roverite!' No use . . . The mare had had enough for one day; she stumbled and fell, rolling heavily over her rider. 'What the (quad-ruple expletive)'s the matter with her?' he continued, extricating himself and kicking the beast till she staggered to her feet. 'Come on agen, an' don't gimme no more of your religiousness.' He remounted, and the mare, under the strong stimulus of his spurs, cantered laboriously out into the dark."

GALLAGHER. Well, Mr Shean, it's not wildly funny as you read it; but it is amusing, I take it, in its context?

SHEAN. Very. I have chosen this passage rather than one of his hilarious accounts of the persecution of bullockies because it shows a Tom Collins utterly ruthless by the most elementary humanitarian standards. We find him chuckling with delight not merely at the unfortunate rider whose steed has rolled heavily over him, but also at the wretched mare which, so tired that it is falling from its feet, is kicked and spurred and goaded into a canter that may kill it. I am reminded of Steele Rudd hysterical with laughter when Dad is trying to cut Joe's finger off because the boy has been bitten by a snake. Mr Gallagher, I am not trying to prove to you that Tom Collins the man was a monster; in his personal life he was probably kind to both animals and men. But he did not write about bullockies to redeem them from oppression, but to show what good fun they were. He does not put his swear words into brackets and euphemisms—"(*quadruple expletive*)"—to conceal the profanity of bullockies, but to draw attention to it; he loved their gory oaths. He is not arch about trousers in order to conceal the fact that they are worn, but to draw attention to them. The chapter where he loses that garment is exactly comparable to the amatory scenes of *The Pickwick Papers*: coy, but thoroughly immoral in intention.

GALLAGHER. Mr Shean, I rush to the first page of *Such Is Life*, and what do I find?—"Unemployed at last! Scientifically, such a contingency can never have befallen of itself. According to one theory of the Universe, the momentum of Original Impress has been tending towards this far-off, divine event ever since a scrap of fire-mist flew from the solar centre to form our planet. Not this event alone, of course; but every occurrence, past and present, from the fall of captured Troy to the fall of a captured insect. According to another theory, I hold an independent diploma as one of the architects of our Social System, with a commission to use my own judgment, and take my own risks, like any other unit of humanity. This theory, unlike the first, entails fre-

quent hitches and cross-purposes; and to some malign operation of these I should owe my present holiday. Orthodoxly, we are reduced to one assumption: namely, that my indomitable old Adversary has suddenly called to mind Dr Watts's friendly hint respecting the easy enlistment of idle hands."

SHEAN. I will admit, Mr Gallagher, that to call the devil "my indomitable old Adversary" is the very indomitable old Adversary of a circumlocution.

GALLAGHER. But, the devil take it, it's all circumlocution!

SHEAN. Granted that the classics are nearly always heavy going in patches; granted that we are all too impatient these days; granted that this is the old style of novel in which, as in Fielding and Sterne, the author is entitled to break into the narrative and prance and posture before the reader; granted that here as in *Tom Jones* it is delightful to find an author who has set out to entertain himself as well as the reader: still it is true that a writer needs to be a Fielding or a Sterne to justify his intrusions, and I find in *Such Is Life* (as I admit I find also in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* but not in *Tristram Shandy*) that, speaking in his own person, the author is not quite amusing enough fully to merit all the space he allows to himself.

GALLAGHER. Then how can you reasonably ask anybody to read such stuff?

SHEAN. I ask you not to read it. Scholars will read it; quiet-minded men with much leisure will read it and find in the playfulness and the puns something of the charm of Charles Lamb; a lesser charm, but genuine. But I do not ask you to bother with second-rate "Essays of Elia" thrust higgledy-piggledy into the midst of a novel about bullockies. I suggest that you begin this book at the foot of page two.

GALLAGHER. "The fore part of the day was altogether devoid of interest or event. Overhead, the sun blazing wastefully and thanklessly through a rarefied atmosphere; underfoot, the hot, black clay, thirsting for spring rain, and bare except for inedible roley-poleys, coarse tussocks, and the woody stubble of close-eaten salt-bush; between sky and earth, a solitary wayfarer, wisely lapt in philosophic torpor.

Ten yards behind the grey saddle-horse follows a black pack-horse." Yes, that's a bit more like it.

SHEAN. I perceive that the light dawns on you. Tom Collins knew or cared so little about the technique of writing that the reader must develop a technique of reading him. Principally, it is a technique of skipping. First, you should skip all critical writings that try to portray this ruthless humorist, this self-confessed lover of scoundrels, as a mere humanitarian sermonizer. Next you should skip his interruptions of his own narrative, whether sermons or flights of whimsicality.

GALLAGHER. How can I do that when, as I perceive, the author intrudes on his story every six pages or so?

SHEAN. Tom Collins was a merciful man. He smoked a meerschaum pipe. And before the worst of his ruminations he usually lights that pipe with great ceremony. While he is lighting it, skip ten pages. And there are other unmistakable warnings. For instance, on page 299, he prefaces an interruption with the apology "Just three words of comment here." And thereby you know at once that you must skip until the next piece of dialogue. There are, in fact, not "three words of comment" but precisely 364.

GALLAGHER. Very well, I shall skip.

SHEAN. Yet even that will not solve the problem of how to read Tom Collins. The general purpose of the book is simply to paint the human comedy as it is played by bullockies. The characters of the bullockies, their yarns and adventures, are the stuff of the novel, the salt and the flavour of it. But Collins is also telling you four stories: the light comedy of his relations with Mrs Beaudesart; the comedy of his losing his clothes while swimming a river, with which is linked the tragi-comedy of a deaf swaggie; the tragedy of Rory O'Halloran, a simple Irish lad who marries a nagging wife and whose daughter—in a most moving episode—is lost in the bush and drowned; and, the most important of the subplots, or rather the basic plot of the book, the story of Cooper and his sister. To explain that story to you, Mr

Gallagher, and to show how it is worked out, I must light my meerschaum pipe and meditate for three hours.

GALLAGHER. Involved?

SHEAN. As a writer in *Meanjin Papers* pointed out, Collins uses a method something like Browning's in *The Ring and the Book*. In more recent times the technique has been used by Faulkner. It consists of allowing each of the principals of the drama—in this case, three—to tell the story, or part of it, from his own "angle". First of all, a bullocky named Cooper tells how his sister was kicked by a horse, disfigured and deserted by the man she was to have married; how she disappeared and is believed to have drowned herself. Then we meet one Warrigal Alf, a surly fellow, who is the faithless lover; then we meet one Nosey Alf, who, though masquerading as a boundary-rider, is none other than the long-lost lady. The difference between Tom Collins's use of this technique and that of Browning or Faulkner—both of whom left you in no doubt as to what they were doing—is that he is so confoundedly subtle about it, casually drifting into his story again after dropping it for maybe fifty pages, that you could easily read *Such Is Life* without knowing that you had been following a connected story. No doubt Collins was trying to avoid the impression of melodrama which he'd have made if he'd told this wild yarn directly. His oversubtlety, I think, is a fault. A novel is not a crossword puzzle, and whimsical fellows have no right to lead their readers up a gum-tree. The point may be debatable; but Collins certainly fell into grievous error—the sin either of carelessness or of unscrupulous mystification—when he made this complicated story still more complicated by bringing in his astounding confusion of Alfs. The lover is Warrigal Alf, the lady is Nosey Alf, both are frequently referred to merely as Alf; and, just to make it really maddening, there is a bullocky named Mosey whom you will inevitably confuse with Nosey and who has nothing whatsoever to do with the drama of Cooper and the two Alfs.

GALLAGHER. You assure me that the rewards are sufficient compensation for all these difficulties?

SHEAN. I would ask you to read from page 248 to 250 wherein the nine Chinese boundary-riders trap and impound 173 bullocks and 81 horses; but to find the full beauty of that comedy of revenge and indignity—as good a bit of humour as ever was written—you will really have to read the whole book. You must meet for yourself the Scot who described the Lachlan as a burn; the stranger who ate two bottles of pickles in the station store; you must read for yourself the marvellous dialogue of Scot and Irishman, Pommy and Dutchman, Chow and German to learn that in the portrayal of character, if debatably in some of the lesser aspects of the novelist's art, Collins was unquestionably a master. This book is written for "the unprincipled reader"—Collins's own phrase—by a man who loved "men who ought to be avoided" and who believed that the proper material for art was "all impressions except those relating to personal injuries". As a novel based on the humour of character, essentially not a political tract but an image of the great tragi-comedy of man upon the earth, a wandering, sprawling, richly earthy tale, it is to be placed in the company of the great picaresques, *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, *The Pickwick Papers*. In Australian writing it stood alone until Eve Langley wrote *The Pea Pickers*.

GALLAGHER. And you seriously maintain that Tom Collins is in the class of those giants?

SHEAN. A. G. Stephens said *Such Is Life* was "fit to become an Australian classic or semi-classic". It is still difficult to be more precise. Collins is a lance-corporal in the company of which Cervantes is the captain.

## THE MOMENT OF VISION

IN the 1943 *Coast to Coast* Alan Marshall has a story entitled "Trees Can Speak". Nobody could read its first few paragraphs and not read on to the end:

"This man never speaks," the store-keeper in the town three miles away had told me. "A few people have heard him say one word like 'Hullo' or something. He makes himself understood by shaking or nodding his head."

"Is there something wrong with him?" I had asked.

"No. He can talk if he wants to. Silent Joe, they call him."

There are two obvious reasons why these opening sentences should immediately catch the reader's interest. In the first place, prospectors called Silent Joe are in the Australian tradition, descendants of Lawson's hatters. Secondly, though the story may be a direct transcript from life, it promises to be bizarre, an account of one of those occasions when life becomes as strange as fantasy and direct reporting as exciting as the flights of imagination.

But a short story doesn't have to be about a hatter to be interesting. It may be Australian without coming into the Lawson tradition, and the central character may just as well be an "ordinary" man with the hatter in him exposed, his differentness, his uniqueness.

There is a principle underlying the obvious attractions of Marshall's opening, and it is this: he has introduced us to a character and promises to give us the full flavour of him.

The promise is fulfilled. The narrator of the story is left alone at the foot of Silent Joe's mine-shaft:

In all the world only I was alive. The darkness had texture and weight like a blanket of black. The silence had no expectancy. I sat brooding sombrely, drained of all sunlight and song. The world of birds and trees and laughter was as remote as a star.

Then he emerges from the shaft:

I suddenly burst into dazzling sunlight. An arm reached out; a hand grasped the handle of the bucket. There was a lift and I felt the solidity of earth beneath me. It was good to stand on something that didn't move, to feel sun on your face.

He stood watching me, his outstretched arm bridging him to a grey box-tree that seemed strangely like himself.

I thanked him and then sat down on the rubble for a yarn. I told him something about myself and something about the people I had met. He listened without moving, but I felt the power of his interest drawing words from me as dry earth absorbs water.

"Good-bye," I said before I left him, and I shook his hand.

I went away, but before I reached the trees I turned and waved to him. He was still standing against the grey box like a kindred tree, but he straightened quickly and waved in return.

"Good-bye," he called, and it was as if a tree had spoken.

This is a slight story, but within its limits it is perfect. In all the arts, the true function of the artist is not just to make a transcript of life, but to create an image, to set down a vision of life. The art of the short story, like that of the lyric—essentially minor but beautiful in its singleness—is to record a moment of vision: a character is suddenly seen in full, at the utmost intensity of his being. To the casual eye, Silent Joe may be just a mad and probably dirty old prospector: to the writer in his moment of vision he is a tree walking.

The vision need not, of course, be as obviously poetic as it is in "Trees Can Speak". In de Maupassant's "Madame Tellier's Establishment", when hysteria sweeps the church, it is wildly comic; Chekhov in "The Little Darling" shows a woman's complete empty-headedness—the vision is tenderly satirical. What the short-story writer has to do is to build some drama that reveals human character—sometimes of a group of people, sometimes no more than a single mood of one individual—at its utmost intensity.

Marshall does this, and so do some but not all of the other *Coast to Coast* contributors.

Frank Davison, who has edited the collection, does it finely in his "The Good Herdsman". The story concerns an old man who, having bought a herd of heifers for re-sale,



finds he can't bear to part with them. Buyers pester him to sell, but old Isaac, who has his full share of the human need to love something, has made the cattle an integral part of his world.

The heifers were camped under the leaning arms of the trees, on earth splashed with shadow and shine. A few were standing, the rest lying down, all were cud-chewing, contentment was with them. It was deep noon, bright and warm, and the somnolence of the hour seemed to absorb the monotone of their swinging jaws. Above them, sky and foliage were the green and cobalt of a parrot's wing. The air was faintly scented with the smell of apples, with the leaves of the trees, and heavily scented with cattle breath. The occasional sound of a deeply blown sigh and the intermittent chirring of a lone cicada sounded loud in stillness. Some of the heifers—at Isaac's sudden appearance—turned large dark eyes on him; bland bovine eyes, disinterested, ruminative, self-absorbed.

If Isaac doesn't destroy this world, not only his neighbours but his own reason will mock and torment him. If he does destroy it, he injures his own deepest being. His dilemma is solved when he comes to the realization that the heifers are not really his to keep or to sell, but creatures that have their own independent life-cycle to fulfil.

The heifers were close to calving, and by that as close to their natural destiny, the milking-sheds of his neighbours. . . . For the first time since he had watched them, as forlorn little poddies, straggling uncertainly up the ridge to a night camp at the close of their first day in his paddock, Isaac felt himself outside their circle. . . . They would rest as contentedly in any other man's paddock. They belonged to themselves.

Here again is the Australian tradition to engage the reader's interest; again the poetry of landscape; but again these are not fundamentally important. It is not fundamentally important that the description of the heifers happens to be a beautiful piece of writing: what matters is that Isaac's character is caught at its utmost intensity in the description. He and his beasts are observed in the same moment of vision.

Myra Morris's "Going Home", a comedy about a man

bringing his wife home from a maternity hospital with her baby, is another story that rises clearly to the moment of vision. Joe has made the house tidy and has polished the stove; Marge doesn't notice. The fowls, to his horror, have got into the garden; Marge doesn't seem to care about that either.

Joe tiptoed out into the yard. It was funny Marge not minding the scraping saw—funny her not minding the scratching chooks. She had always made a row before. He looked appreciatively about him. The afternoon light was beginning to fail. The dead, silvery timber, the sheds, the shaggy gum-tree, the cows down by the bails, the white fowls pecking near the grassy border, seemed washed with a cold greyish-lilac, seemed melting, dissolving into that shadowy lilac, becoming part of it, inseparable from it. All at once everything that he saw seemed precious and significant. He wanted to gather every detail up and hold it fast. He could see now. Marge in there. She was temporarily removed from him, complete in herself, happy and serene, above and beyond the little irritations and obligations of outside life. She was shrouded, safe in her motherhood as in a cocoon.

"Wrapped in a dream," he thought, as he moved through the lilac half-light, "wrapped in a dream."

"Everything he saw seemed precious and significant." That is exactly what the short-story writer has to catch: the moment of significance.

The moment when the significance of a character is revealed. Silent Joe is not a universal type; on the contrary, Alan Marshall set out to show us in all its richness the uniqueness of his personality. Isaac is not any old man, but Isaac Butts who loves his heifers. Marge is not any woman, nor any mother, but strongly and distinctly herself. So, too, is the Lil of Elizabeth Parson's low-life story, which, ending too abruptly, just fails to convey a moment of illumination the author indubitably felt. As a story it does not quite "come off"; but Lil is a true projection of character.

There is one group of writings in *Coast to Coast* which cannot truly be classified as short stories. They are those which attempt to convey vision without character: Jon Cleary's "Death Comes Slowly", Gene McCarthy's "Choco-

late Soldier", d'Arcy Niland's "The Surrealist" and—though some traces of characterization come in to redeem them—Belle Atherton's "The Rivals", Hal Porter's "At Aunt Sophia's" and Marjorie Robertson's "Jennie".

Frank Davison says in his introduction, "The artist is entitled to write how he likes of whatever has seemed to him important enough to hold his interest." It is a disarmingly tolerant definition of a short story: but Davison himself has narrowed it elsewhere in his introduction by excluding from serious consideration "escapist fiction, magazine stories, pink-sugar romances and ten-minute newspaper stories with the verities sacrificed to the indispensable trick endings". The six stories just listed are certainly worth serious consideration—in one respect, as stories "worth quarrelling about", they are the most interesting of the collection—but, because they are impersonal analyses of states of mind rather than portraits of individuals, they are not short stories as the form was defined by the great masters, Chekhov and de Maupassant.

Hal Porter is the "discovery" of this year's anthology. To anyone who has not read Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and who has not followed the exploration of childhood and adolescence in the Penguin *New Writing* series and in *New Zealand New Writing*, "At Aunt Sophia's" will be startling in its novelty. And even to readers who will recognize it as an essay in a familiar contemporary pattern, its adaptation of contemporary methods to the author's own purposes and to the Australian scene will be highly impressive: "Swagmen logs are prone among the sheep." Incidental portraits of Aunt Sophia and a gravedigger are richly drawn; only his central figure, a boy at the crisis of adolescence, does not come to life as an individual, but is the universal adolescent out of *New Writing* or out of a Freudian case-book. The adolescent—poor innocent—is a figure of tragedy to himself, if you like; but to the wicked world he is always a bit of a joke. Porter has looked into him, but not at him.

The other stories in this group are not so striking. D'Arcy

Niland's "Surrealist", using "wimpleds" and "wamblings" and "winkles" borrowed probably from *Finnegans Wake*, but sounding perilously like echoes of Lewis Carroll, is a lively attempt at writing a very modern story in which the anonymous central character asks a series of questions about the universe. It is promising, but too obviously an "attempt" really to have merited inclusion. *Coast to Coast* was not originally intended to encourage the young by premature publication, but to set a standard to which the young might climb.

"The Rivals" is a slight, pleasant little piece about a small boy whose anthropomorphic affection for railway trains is replaced by affection for aeroplanes when he sees a plane come near to crashing. The boy is any small boy, but the story is nicely dramatized. "Jennie" is a portrait of the universal Little Man by a writer who has only to forget about the Little Man and his frustrations to take a high rank in Australian writing.

"Death Comes Slowly" and "Chocolate Soldier" are war stories, one set in Crete and the other in New Guinea, both well written, but so far removed from genuine characterization that nobody could tell Cleary's soldier from McCarthy's. Nor, as it happens, would you find much to distinguish either of them from the V.C. in Mary Lisle's "The Welcome Home".

Writing stories with vision but without character is essentially a modern fashion. There is always the defence for them that they widen the range of the short story: that something new may come out of them, as has happened with the *New Zealand New Writing* group (absent from this *Coast to Coast* except for an oddity by G. R. Gilbert), and as is almost certain to happen with Hal Porter's writing. The opposite type of story, with character but without vision, is always with us.

Frank Davison has included a surprisingly large group of these: honest, faithful stories that don't get anywhere in particular; slices of life without butter on them. There is "The Welcome Home"; there are Xavier Herbert's yarn of

an aboriginal song-maker and a white man fossicking for gold—an item that should be a comedy but which fails to be more than a yarn because Herbert disapproves of his fossicker instead of seeing him as comic; a conventional love-of-the-land story by J. K. Ewers, pleasant but falling short of poetry; a description of a family of evangelists by George Farwell which could have been either a comedy or a tragedy, but which never rises above the commonplace; two stories by E. Dithmack, one a story of frustrated love with a good description of a possum hunt in it, and the other an ordinary magazine triangle; a portrait of an attendant in a tuberculosis sanatorium by Robert S. Close, intended to be sardonically tragic but failing to be more than disgusting; and a boxing yarn by Stewart Howard which, like all Australian boxing stories, evades the moment of vision which could be found in a triumph in the ring but which, at a point when a defeated boxer is watching outside a block of flats where his lady is entertaining his rival, climbs at least to the second floor of tragedy.

Near-misses in a different category are Peter Cowan's "Temporary Job" and Rence Featherstone's "King for a Night". There is a Lawson-like aridity about "Temporary Job"—accentuated by the monotone of short sentences in which it is narrated. Cowan builds up a strong, tense atmosphere, but for very little purpose.

What is hardest to find in this number of *Coast to Coast* is the moment of humour. There are some near-tragic moments; there are the revelations of contentment in Silent Joe, of beauty and pathos in Isaac and his heifers, of quiet loveliness in Marge in her reverie of motherhood; but only in "King for a Night"—uncertainly here—and sketchily in Margaret Trist's "Else's Third Baby" does anybody bring us the perception of how richly comic is the spectacle of man on the earth.

Frank Davison says that comedy was hard to find; and that—comedy being hard to write—is always likely to be the case. Nevertheless, James Hackston could have been

included. And it seems a pity to have represented Brian James, who is essentially a comedy writer, by a funeral-piece. Margaret Trist's is a gay little item but—like most of her early stories—it lacks form, reading more like a chapter from a novel than a properly constructed story moving in a definite direction.

## WILL LAWSON'S WHALERS

THE ballad "All Soul's Eve" with which Will Lawson concludes his *Bill the Whaler* is an effective summary of the book as a whole. The balladist, in his role of a retired whaler, is awake in bed, late at night. There is a hammering on the door and he goes downstairs to greet the unrepentant and surprisingly solid ghost of Bill the Whaler.

Bill gripped my hand. "Look here!" he said,  
We've got a party on—  
There's me and Horrigan and Ned  
And Butcher and Long John. . . .

The party is at some mysterious pub in space, a whalers' Valhalla. To reach it Bill and the balladist go flying off among the comets,

Down endless pathways lit by stars  
Where Roaring Forties blew,  
By waters littered with ship's spars  
And figureheads we knew.

They reach the sublime hostelry. Firelight and dance music stream out from its windows among the stars.

And there were Molly, Sal and Rose  
And Dot and Magdalene:  
Warm as the wind from Tonga blows  
Old comrades cheered us in.

In Ned and Horrigan and Long John, Molly and Rose and Dot, we have met the old whalers and their girls. Now come the ships that will never sail the waters of the earth again:

Bill led me to the window then  
That overlooked a bay  
Where ghosts of old ships lived again  
And in their beauty lay.  
The Albion that sailed before  
Them all—Eb. Bunker's ship;  
The Runnymede and Marie Laure  
That mutinied one trip.

The lovely Helen, last to sail,  
The Prince that never paid;  
The Derwent Hunter; at her rail  
The beautiful old Maid.

The list continues. The balladist has come to Emerald Island, Bill tells him—that dream island of the Pacific which, so an earlier ballad informs us, was charted once but never could be found again, and which serves Lawson as a convenient and highly appropriate symbol for his Valhalla.

This is the end of voyages,  
This is the port for all  
Brave men who live nor ever guess  
What fate may them befall.

I gazed on all the ships out there,  
I looked on men inside  
Who once had found the sea so fair—  
'Twas shameful they had died.  
He touched my hand. I looked at Bill.  
He gripped and held me fast.  
"Welcome!" he said. "Old Barnacle,  
"You've come to us at last!"

"You've come to us at last" . . . there's the pride of achievement in that line. It's not just Bill's ghost welcoming the balladist to the disreputable and gallant company on Emerald Island; it's the author unconsciously affirming his own work—he has done something really good, he has "come home", and he knows it. Because he feels so deeply for the old whalers and their ships, feels so strongly that "'Twas shameful they had died", he has been able to recreate them. They have not died; they live in these verses.



There are technical faults in this book: an inability to complete a poem shown sometimes in the repetition of the first stanza for a conclusion; surrenders to the exigencies of rhyme ("Whose history was queer"); some prosiness; some empty verbiage when the thought—always happiest on the deck of a ship—climbs into the rigging and takes off. But there is also some balladry as good as any that has ever been written.

At his best, as in "Bill the Moocher", "The Flying Dutchman" or "Old Mac", Will Lawson stands beside Kipling and Masfield. That is a statement not lightly made. It must be tested by quotation and comparison. And the test will show that—in ballad writing—the loneliness of the sea, its width and its depth and its terror, have never been more strongly conveyed than in the lament for Old Mac, who wanted to be buried either near his "dear New Zealand hills" or in his native Scotland, but who was lowered from the ship's side into the Tonga Deep—"And it's six-mile deep down there".

The tall seas looked like his hills of home  
 (If his eyes had not been dark),  
 Till along a ridge ran a line of foam  
 That slithered beneath the barque;  
 And the yelling wester screamed again  
 Till we dropped in the valley between;  
 And we buried Old Mac, that king of men,  
 Between those mountains green.

He said he would like to sleep beside  
 The kirk where he was named  
 Ere he sailed away where the skies are wide  
 And there's nothing between but wind and tide,  
 The sea no man has tamed.  
 But we buried him down in Tonga Deep  
 And the Old Man said this prayer,  
 "In the arms of God Old Mac will sleep!"  
*And it's six-mile deep down there.*

"The Flying Dutchman", though sailing for the most part the good, rough earth-bound sea of balladry, mounts

at times into the air that Coleridge knew. The ballad is seldom quite the same thing as poetry; but this one, transcending Kipling's comparatively commonplace world of men and action, comes at least as close to poetry as do the macabre and ghostly ballads of medieval times:

There had been death aboard us—  
The Butcher and Mackay—  
Their ghosts would often join us  
Up on the royals high,  
Where they had both been topmen.  
They handed sail with us  
But never spoke nor nothin',  
Nor groaned nor made no fuss;  
Then down the yellin' waters  
The Flyin' Dutchman came  
With lofty canvas shinin'  
An' blazin' bows aflame.

In the foreword to his book Will Lawson tells how the Bill the Whaler verses came to him out of memories of a Captain William McKillop, born in New Zealand in 1862 and died in 1938. "These verses were inspired—I had almost said written—by him. As I wrote them, mostly in the 'middle watch' of the night, I seemed to feel his influence, guiding my thoughts if not my hand. All I had to do was scribble them down as fast as my pencil would move."

Before they were collected into book form the poems came tumbling into the *Bulletin* office three or four a week. Whether or not Old Bill had anything to do with them, they were certainly an astonishing outburst of poetic energy. More certainly than anything he has done before, the book will give Will Lawson a permanent place in the history of the Australian ballad; and if the *Oxford Book of Ballads* is ever brought up to date he will have to be considered along with Masfield, Kipling and the recognized Australian rhymers,

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

HEADED "The Blank Verse of 'The Wanderer'", a letter written by Christopher Brennan to his friend Richard Pennington, now librarian of Queensland University, has been published in *Southerly*.

Those who have read all that has been written about Brennan's scansion—in particular the learned attempts to prove that he wrote in classic metre—will appreciate fully what a bombshell it is. "I have not written about my 'metrical innovations'," said Brennan, "because there aren't any, only developments." He scans "a few of the seemingly more licentious lines":

*Hither and thither upon the earth and grow weary  
The woods shall awake hearing them, shall awake to be tost and riven  
And the waves of darkness yonder in the gaunt hollow of night  
For until ye have had care of the wastes there shall be no truce.*

Citing Milton, the Bible and Blake as forerunners in this sort of measure, Brennan points out that he is scanning by stresses. "The verse of five stresses is not an iambic pentameter, and that of six is not an Alexandrine." In short, he wrote a line sometimes of five stresses, sometimes of six, and he didn't bother about the unstressed syllables.

Where the critics have gone wrong is in trying to make some orderly measure out of the unstressed syllables. Scanned in the orthodox way, the lines are a wild jumble of iambs and anapaests and dactyls and spondees and what have you. They are not, Brennan says in effect, meant to be scanned in that way; disregard the unstressed syllables and you get an easy and natural rhythm of sometimes five, sometimes six, stresses per line.

The misunderstanding of Brennan was probably due to

the critics' imagining that standard English poems, which pass as regular in scansion, are, in fact, regular. But the great poems of the language are nearly always a mixture of the natural rhythm of stresses that Brennan used and the artificial "regular" metres.

For instance, in Wordsworth's "Sonnet on Westminster Bridge", there is the perfectly correct iambic pentameter

*And all that mighty heart is lying still.*

That is the last line, and, whether he was aware of it or not, Wordsworth wrote correct iambics there because he wanted a smooth ending to his sonnet, a sort of marble finish. Elsewhere it is hard to find a "correct" line in the sonnet; the ideally-correct line, that is to say, where stress and accent fall together, making an unexceptionable iambic pentameter. Not fully aware of what he was doing—though he did know there was something terribly wrong with the classicism of Pope—Wordsworth may have scanned the line "Dull would he be of soul who could pass by" to read in his mind:

*Dull would he be of soul who could pass by;*

but, spoken aloud in its natural rhythm, the line is

*Dull would he be of soul who could pass by;*

which is a long way from being a regular iambic, but which is still a good line of five stresses.

This confusion between stress and accent, between natural and artificial scansion, is to be found in nearly all standard poems. For some reason or other poets are continually forgetting that they have the right to count only their stressed syllables if they wish; forgetting, indeed, that this system of scansion is traditional in English poetry.

Dryden and Pope, those masters of artificial metre, apparently knew nothing whatsoever about natural rhythm. Mistaking the moral for the image and verse for poetry, the eighteenth century also mistook metre for rhythm. "The

discovery of Dryden and his follower Pope, that Chaucer and others were 'rude' in their versification," says the editor of the Cambridge edition of Dunbar, "was perhaps the greatest literary mare's nest ever announced."

The letter in *Southerly* does not indicate whether Brennan knew how common his method of scansion has been in English poetry. He mentions some lines of Milton; Blake and the Bible. Did he know that the system goes right back to "Piers Plowman"?

Here, in a four-beat line instead of the five or six beats of Brennan, is exactly the same principle of scanning by stresses:

In a *somer seson* when *soft* was the *sonne*  
 I *shope* me in *shroudes* as I a shepe *were*,  
 In *habite* as an *eremite unholy* of *workes*  
 Went *wyde* in this *world wondres* to *here*.

With the alliteration dropped and a five-beat line substituted for the four-beat, this is precisely the principle on which Webster scanned the blank verse that has so baffled his academic editors. Chaucer scanned in this way; so did Dunbar.

Whitman (who perhaps, being athletic in all things, took very deep breaths) rolled out most of his allegedly "free" verses in lines of seven stresses. Hopkins, whose amusing conception of "hangers" and "outriders" simply meant the disregarding of the unstressed syllables, employed the same principle under the name of "sprung rhythm"; as did Bridges after him. In our own time, it is the method used by T. S. Eliot.

"Properly read aloud," said Brennan, "the measure ought not to worry anybody." Scan in regular iambics and fail to let in an anapaest or two, he believed, "and you will very soon kill your reader". He knew, in other words, that he was using the natural and living rhythm of English poetry.

It may not be generally realized how natural that rhythm is. Molière stated only a half-truth when he made his quip

about the man who had talked prose all his life without knowing it; most people, when their emotions are aroused, talk poetry without knowing it.

I once heard a man speaking of his home in the country: "The air's so clear—ten miles away at night you can hear the whistle and the train coming into the station. You can hear it going away to Brisbane in the night, and that's ten miles away." Then he went on to rage against the city: "You can feel the air all thick with the people tramping the bitumen up off the roads."

He was speaking with emotion; and, in a line of five stresses, he was talking a quite tolerable poetry:

The *air's* so *clear*—ten *miles* away at *night*  
 You can *hear* the *whistle*, and the *train* coming *into* the *station*.  
 You can *hear* it going *away* to *Brisbane* in the *night*,  
 And *that's* ten *miles* away.

You can *feel* the *air* all *thick* with the *people* *tramping*  
 The *bitumen* *up* off the *roads*.

That is the natural speech rhythm on which all the academic measures of poetry are based. It is the rhythm of the awakened emotions, like the beat of the heart. If you listen for it carefully you will hear it nearly always when people are recalling the cherished scenes of childhood; and it lends a pleasing dignity to household quarrels to know that they are usually conducted in a blank verse of five stresses per line.

People, of course, do not talk very good poetry. And that is the danger of the natural method of scansion. As one can easily see in Whitman, and sometimes in Hopkins, it becomes chaotic. One loses the beat of the stresses in the wilderness of unstressed syllables. Or, if the beat is not strong enough, the result is the monotonous mumble in which a good deal of Eliot's *The Family Reunion* is written.

Uncontrolled natural rhythm will confuse the reader; over-controlled academic metre, in Brennan's phrase, will kill him. The poet's problem is to strike a balance between

the two systems, as Brennan did consciously and as most good poets have done unconsciously.

Since natural and artificial rhythms are thus equally important, Brennan's assertion that "the verse of five stresses is not an iambic pentameter, and that of six is not an Alexandrine" is likely to be misleading. The statement is correct as far as it goes; but it would be better to regard his five-stress line as an iambic pentameter modified by natural rhythm, or a line of natural rhythm modified by the iambic pentameter—whichever way you like to put it. He took the iambic pentameter for the basis of his verse; then played with it, "counter pointed" it, or, to use another—and an appropriate—term of Hopkins's, "sprang" it on the critics.

## HARBOUR AND OCEAN

KENNETH SLESSOR's "Five Bells", the outstanding achievement among his verses reprinted in *One Hundred Poems*, arose in the same way as did Milton's lament for Ned King, Matthew Arnold's for Arthur Hugh Clough and Tennyson's for Hallam—it mourns the death of a friend of the writer's youth.

Clearly without any attempt at imitation—indeed, breaking clear away from the Arcadian tradition set by Milton and followed by Shelley in "Adonais" and Arnold in "Thyrsis"—it is made very much in the pattern of Arnold's elegy. This is Arnold establishing the fact of his friend's death:

Some life of men unblest  
He knew, which made him droop, and fill'd his head.  
He went; his piping took a troubled sound  
Of storms that rage outside our happy ground;  
He could not wait their passing, he is dead.

So, some tempestuous morn in early June,  
When the year's primal burst of bloom is o'er,  
Before the roses and the longest day—  
When garden-walks and all the grassy floor,  
With blossoms, red and white, of fallen May,  
And chestnut-flowers are strewn—  
So I have heard the cuckoo's parting cry,  
From the wet field, through the vext garden-trees,  
Come with the volleying rain and tossing breeze:  
*The bloom is gone, and with the bloom go I!*

And here is Slessor:

. . . You have gone from earth,  
Gone even from the meaning of a name;



Yet something's there, yet something forms its lips  
And hits and cries against the ports of space,  
Beating their sides to make its fury heard.

Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face  
In agonies of speech on speechless panes?  
Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!

But I hear nothing, nothing . . . only bells,  
Five bells, the bumpkin calculus of Time.  
Your echoes die, your voice is dowsed by Life,  
There's not a mouth can fly the pygmy strait—  
Nothing except the memory of some bones  
Long shoved away, and sucked away, in mud.

Here is Arnold recalling scenes he once shared with the  
dead man:

Where is the girl, who, by the boatman's door,  
Above the locks, above the boating throng,  
Unmoored our skiff, when, through the Wytham flats,  
Red loosestrife and blond meadow-sweet among,  
And darting swallows, and light water-gnats,  
We track'd the shy Thames shore?  
Where are the mowers, who, as the tiny swell  
Of our boat passing heav'd the river grass,  
Stood with suspended scythes to see us pass?—  
They are all gone, and thou art gone as well.

And here is Slessor:

The night we came to Moorebank in slab-dark,  
So dark you bore no body, had no face,  
But a sheer voice that rattled out of air  
(As now you'd cry if I could break the glass),  
A voice that spoke beside me in the bush,  
Loud for a breath or bitten off by wind,  
Of Milton, melons and the Rights of Man,  
And blowing flutes, and how Tahitian girls  
Are brown and angry-tongued, and Sydney girls  
Are white and angry-tongued, or so you'd found.

Here is Matthew Arnold trying to discover where the  
spirit of his friend has gone to:

Thou hearest the immortal strains of old.  
Putting his sickle to the perilous grain,  
In the hot cornfield of the Phrygian king,  
For thee the Lityerses song again  
Young Daphnis with his silver voice doth sing;  
Sings his Sicilian fold,  
His sheep, his hapless love, his blinded eyes;  
And how a call celestial round him rang,  
And heavenward from the fountain-brink he sprang,  
And all the marvel of the golden skies.

And here is Slessor:

I looked out of my window in the dark  
At waves with diamond quills and combs of light  
That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand  
In the moon's drench, that straight enormous glaze,  
And ships far off asleep, and Harbour-buoys  
Tossing their fireballs wearily each to each,  
And tried to hear your voice, but all I heard  
Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal  
Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells,  
Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out.

How, since the quotations have been made, does "Five Bells" compare with "Thyrsis"? Comparisons are supposed to be vulgar, but they are the basis of all criticism. If a poem by a contemporary Australian writer will not stand up to comparison with the traditional masterpieces of the language, then it is not worth serious discussion.

Firstly then, Arnold's elegy is the longer—twice as long—and, as A. G. Stephens continually warned Australian writers, bulk is important. Yet some of the great elegies—"In Memoriam", certainly—are far too long; Slessor's is an impressive enough piece of architecture to be judged in the best company.

Secondly, Slessor has both gained and lost something by breaking away from the pastoral tradition to a modern realism: lost something of charm and sweetness and melody, gained something in strength and passion and the deeper music of grief. Arnold's is a poem of regret, Slessor's of agony.

To choose "Thyrsis" rather than "The Scholar Gipsy" for comparison is perhaps a kindness to the Australian poet, for he has nothing in "Five Bells" to match the melody and colour of the great conclusion to that poem, the grapes, the Chian wine, the green bursting figs, the blue Midland waters and the dark Iberians: but neither has Arnold in either of these elegies the profound and tragic music of Slessor's conclusion, that mighty waste of the Harbour, the boat's whistle, and the bells that ring and die.

It would be profitless to try to reach a verdict on the comparisons. Poems are judged by the world—and rightly so—not in isolation, but in relation to the whole body of a man's work. We know what Matthew Arnold's stature is, but it is much too early to try to say where Slessor stands. Reprinted from three books of poems published in limited editions during the last twenty years and amounting practically to a Collected Works for the period, *One Hundred Poems* will establish Slessor in the forefront of contemporary Australian writing and ensure a permanent reputation for him; but exactly what that reputation is to be depends on what he writes in the twenty years to come.

Apart from its merits as poetry, "Five Bells" is interesting as marking the end of a phase in Slessor's development. Elegies are never quite the disinterested lamentations they may appear. When poets sing the death of a friend they are to a large extent saying good-bye not to the dead companion but to their own youth; Arnold to "the old days" at Oxford, Slessor to the old days at Darlinghurst.

So "Five Bells" brings to a conclusion all Kenneth Slessor's personal poetry. Far more truly than "The Great Play", in which he makes this claim, it is "a Complete Life and Works"; friendship, beer, girls, country tracks where youth strode with fury through the night, gaslit rooms in Sydney where youth argued about blowing up the world—that is really what Slessor has seen shoved away and sucked away in the mud of Sydney Harbour.

Throughout the richness and variety of his hundred poems—an achievement in pure art to which Ronald McCuaig

did full justice in an essay first published on the Red Page and lately reprinted in his *Tales Out of Bed*—Slessor has returned again and again to two themes, Sydney Harbour and the Pacific. Though he has written about the countryside with a fine, sardonic clarity and sometimes, as in “Wild Grapes”, with love, Slessor is not a poet of the landscape, certainly no pantheist. He may drive through country towns with their willows and squares and farmers bouncing on barrel mares; he may glance for a moment with a sharp eye at the “gesturing wood” of the north country or the “monstrous continent of air” over the south country, but one always feels that he is glad to get back to the neon signs of William Street; the countryside turns its back on him with the “scornful rumps of cows”. Even in the very second-rate rusticity of a botanic gardens the swans stare at him reproachfully. He is the poet of Sydney and its Harbour:

Water remains, cables and bells remain,  
And lanterns over Pinchgut float with light.

Beyond the harbour of personal life is the ocean of the world; and Slessor—one sees him as a poet at a tower window, sometimes staring down at the water and grinning wryly at his reflection, sometimes gazing out to the blue horizon beyond the Heads and seeing the wraiths of the great voyagers—is always likely to pack his dunnage and set off on a voyage himself. Always likely

Suddenly to become John Benbow, walking down William-street  
With a tin trunk and a five-pound note, looking for a place to eat,  
And a peajacket the colour of a shark's behind  
That a Jew might buy in the morning.

Not only Hugh McCrae's poems, but all the adventurers of the Pacific rush into his mind like “Uncles who burst on childhood from the East”:

Bearers of parrots, bonfires of blazing stones,  
Their pockets fat with riches out of reason,  
Meerschmum and sharks'-teeth, ropes of China coins,  
And weeds and seeds and berries blowzed with poison.

Like his own Captain Dobbin, he has watched from his Sydney window

. . . boats go by, suspended in the pane,  
Blue Funnel, Red Funnel, Messageries Maritimes,  
Lugged down the port like sea-beasts taken alive  
That scrape their bellies on sharp sands,  
Of which particulars Captain Dobbin keeps  
A ledger sticky with ink,  
Entries of time and weather, state of the moon,  
Nature of cargo and captain's name,  
For some mysterious and awful purpose  
Never divulged . . .

with the difference that Slessor has at least partly divulged his mysterious and awful purpose: he has wished to be the poet not only of his largely subjective Sydney Harbour, but of the broad Pacific. Moving towards the larger creativeness of an objective poetry, he has wished to paint all the romantic colours of the Pacific:

. . . dozing houses  
Crammed with black bottles, marish wine  
Crusty and salt-corroded, fading prints,  
Sparkle-daubed almanacs and playing cards,  
With rusty cannon left by the French outside,  
Half-buried in sand,  
Even to the castle of Queen Pomaree  
In the Yankee's footsteps, and found her throne-room piled  
With golden candelabras, mildewed swords,  
Guitars and fowling-pieces, tossed in heaps  
With greasy cakes and flung-down calabashes.

And he has wished still more to celebrate the great adventurers who travelled through or made that colour:

For Cook he worshipped, that captain with the sad  
And fine white face, who never lost a man  
Or flinched a peril; and of Bougainville  
He spoke with graceful courtesy.

Slessor's earlier voyages, his adventures with Lao-Tzu, Rubens, Marco Polo, Heine and Laurence Sterne, might be interpreted as a series of explorations in search of the

navigators of the Pacific; so, too, the wanderings of "The Atlas". He roved all over the world and all through history looking for the great theme, and came at last to "Captain Dobbin" and the "Five Visions of Captain Cook".

Slessor may be generally recognized as the finest artist in Australian poetry since Hugh McCrae, but he has probably never been given full credit for his importance as the poet of the Pacific, and consequently as a "national" Australian poet. While most of the younger writers are now rediscovering and exploiting what O'Dowd and Pater-son found—our own continent—Slessor (and Robert Fitz-Gerald) are reaching out into the Pacific. The nation is watching the islands now; it will watch them more and more in the years to come: Captain Dobbin's eye—"that eye of wild and wispy scudding blue"—was fixed on them fifteen years ago.

In his latest poems, published in the "Five Bells" volume, Slessor seems to have forgotten the Pacific. Only in his verses on Marsden and momentarily in the tribute to Hugh McCrae does he revert to this theme of such magnificent possibilities. The achievement of this book was to bring his personal poetry to consummation, the noble consummation of his elegy. But, delightful as "Captain Dobbin" is—a portrait that Browning could have painted—and interesting as are the glimpses of Captain Cook, one does not feel that Slessor has said his last word on the Pacific.

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## “WE WERE THE RATS”

THE novelist's first task is the creation of character; his second, the dramatization of his characters in action. It is because he has performed these two feats so successfully that Lawson Glassop's *We Were the Rats*, besides being a kind of history and a kind of epic—a stirring presentation of the legend of Tobruk—is sound and strong as a novel.

Apart from the narrator, Mick Reynolds, the first of Glassop's principal characters is a little dark soldier with gleaming black hair and a small black moustache, who is introduced when he is complaining about the Ingleburn latrines; he is established as Clive Fenstone, a sensitive intellectual. Next there is Eddie, big, blue-eyed and hard, who picks a fight with Mick Reynolds at their first meeting and thereafter becomes his “cobber”. Here are the other principals as Eddie introduces them:

“I want ya ter meet Pat McDonald,” said Eddie. . . . “Pat's a queer bloody mixture—Scotch-Irish-Australian.” . . .

I saw at once that Pat had that enchanting Irish smile. “Don't take any notice of that ape,” he said amiably. I was nearly six feet, but he was several inches taller. I estimated that he weighed sixteen stone, but he was not fat. I had seen him shaving that morning, seen the muscles bulging on his back. He had fair hair and frank eyes.

“Pat's an insurance clerk,” said Eddie. “We'll have ter get him ter insure us all before we go off ter die for the Empire.”

We laughed. “You'd all be a better risk than you taxi-drivers,” he said to Eddie.

“An' this here's 'Happy' Curben. He's an electrician. His laugh'd crack the ears of the galahs in an old gum half a mile away. Wonder they doan ban him from the front line, 'cause he'll give our positions away. . . .”

Happy, who was short and fat, began to laugh. I had never heard a laugh like it. You ceased to fight against it, for it overwhelmed you.

"This here's Harry Creege," said Eddie. "Not satisfied with the D.C.M. and M.M. from the last stink. He's after the V.C. in this. He's a miner. You'd uv thought he'd uv joined the pioneers so's he could go on diggin' holes."

Harry grinned. As he shook my hand I felt the callouses on his. He was small, his brown hair was getting thin on top and his brown face was weather-beaten.

"And this is Jim Mills. The original bastard from the bush." . . .

"Glad ter know yous both," said Jim awkwardly. He was small and so colourless he attracted attention. He looked as though the sun had bleached him—his hair, his skin, even his eyebrows and lashes.

"Still got the hay in his hair," said Eddie. "First mornin' he come here he says, 'Cripes, this is good-o. Yer don't have ter get up till five o'clock.'" . . .

"And last comes Gordon C. Harday," said Pat. "God's gift to the business world."

"Last," said Gordon, "but not least. Harday speaking. My card, gentlemen." He handed us, with a flamboyant gesture, a card each. We read "Gordon C. Harday, M.L.A." . . .

The others laughed. "How dare you laugh at the future biggest business magnate in Australia," said Gordon in mock annoyance. "If anybody questions me about the M.L.A. part I say it means 'Melbourne's Leading Advertiser'."

Clive and I laughed. We thought it was a joke. Gordon was podgy. His plump face and double chin betrayed a taste for rich food, an avoidance of exercise and a natural tendency towards fatness. His hair was ginger, his face pale, his nose substantial and his movements awkward.

"There's room for you in my organization," he said to me. "Stick to me, buddy, and you'll wear diamonds. It'll be a sad day when Harday can't light his cigar with a pound note."

These are the characters. That strange and remote being the ordinary Australian of today, encountered in his thousands in the street, but so rarely portrayed in the novel and, when seen, too often shown in the distorting mirror of some fashionable theory of art or politics; that almost legendary monster the young man from next door—each one of Glassop's people would be worth meeting in any Australian novel; and they are doubly worth meeting in this novel of Tobruk because, seen in the fierce and tragic light of war, they are seen whole, with a violent and



poignant clarity, each at the utmost intensity of his being.

Glassop has not set out to write anything so naive as a pacifist "attack" on war; his men are not shown as suffering victims of avoidable circumstance. He has not set out to appal the reader with horrors nor to harrow him with miseries; the general tone of his book is a hard gaiety. Yet the light in which the men are seen is essentially—and inevitably—tragic. "These were the men," Mick thinks as he is introduced to them, "with whom I'd have to live, possibly with whom I'd have to die."

*Some of these men are going to die*, that is the theme that brings to *We Were the Rats* tragedy amongst its humour, dignity amongst its colloquialism and unity amongst its diversity.

Glassop's handling of this theme is his finest achievement. It could so easily have been overdone, and the novel would have fallen into sentimentality. It could so easily have been evaded, and one would have had either an exaggerated "toughness" or the horrifying jauntiness of "light" novels of war. But the theme is neither evaded nor over-emphasized; it is stated quietly as a fact, just often enough to remind the reader that this is a serious novel and war a serious business.

We got up—a furniture salesman, a miner, a farmer, an insurance clerk, a taxi-driver, a wool-classer, an ex-jockey, an electrician, and a charlatan—and went swinging across the parade ground, some of us grumbling obscenely to ourselves when the corporal shouted at us to get our arms up.

I could see Clive . . . with his elbows locked, his wrists pointed down, his hands "lightly clenched". I could see his obdurate determination to do his best, come what may. His black moustache was bristling with martial ardour.

Suddenly he turned his head slightly, looked at me, and gave me a quick smile. I saw something in his eyes, and I knew that of us all only he and I had the slightest idea of what lay ahead, only he and I knew that, "somewhere on a foreign field", some of us would lie dying.

In the ordinary novel the writer who seeks to show the development of character under the stress of action takes

a group of people with some common interest, and, as his plot reaches its culmination, so, simultaneously, does his study of the personalities concerned in it. Character and action come simultaneously to crisis. In a historical novel this unity is extremely difficult to achieve. Glassop is not writing a neat little story of the feuds or affections that may develop among his characters, but is attempting the epic of Tobruk.

It is remarkable that he has never lost sight of the development of character; that, even with so tempting a theme, he has not submerged the novelist in the historian; that instead of relying merely on the love affair of Mick Reynolds and his Margaret to hold the book together—the conventional and probably inescapable pattern for war novels; very well done here, it might be added—Glassop has brought every one of his principal characters to crisis.

He is not able to do that neatly, all in one culminating chapter as it would ordinarily be effected; but each man does, under the threat and movement of war, reveal himself in all the fulness of his being before we part with him.

Clive, the sensitive intellectual, is dramatized in an unforgettable scene in a cemetery outside Gaza where, gazing at a soldier's tombstone, he falls into some nightmare state of trance and sees his own name on it, with the date of his death. This certainty of doom upon him is skilfully pushed aside by the author for many chapters; we see Clive broadening, becoming more at ease with the world, with his mates and with war, saying and doing a hundred things he'd "never have thought of before he joined the army"; but underneath his mask of ease there is panic, a panic heroically controlled. He goes out on patrol to his death on the date the vision had foretold.

Pat McDonald is "diced" by his girl in Tobruk; he becomes a merciless killer. "Happy", the short fat fellow with the overwhelming laugh, is beaten by his nerves and shoots himself. Harry Creege, the last war veteran with the D.C.M. and the M.M., dies of wounds, confessing that his life had been a failure because he couldn't keep off the booze. Jim,

the man from the bush, is killed. Harday, before he dies of his wounds, admits for a moment there is more in life than making money—there was a girl—then goes out defiantly, declaring “I had — ability.” Balancing this series of tragedies, there is Mick Reynolds’s lyrical honeymoon with his Margaret on his return to Australia; a charming and deeply moving little episode before the book ends with Reynolds going off to New Guinea.

Eddie, the tough ex-taxidriver, is another who comes through safely. In spite of the colour and humour of the irrepressible Gordon C. Harday, Eddie is Glassop’s most appealing piece of portraiture.

In any novel written under Hemingway influence Eddie would have been the silent “tough guy”; in a novel written under the influence of the journalism that sees the “typical” A.I.F. man as a larrikin, Eddie, with his crudities approved and glorified, would have been the hero. Glassop has given a finely balanced account of him and, so far as he is from glorifying the crudities of which Eddie himself is ashamed, the scene where Eddie, having mistaken Julius Cæsar for a horse, leaves Mick and Clive to their learned conversation and goes off into Tel Aviv to get drunk is as moving in its pathos as any of the deaths in battle.

Eddie is important in a second theme running through *We Were the Rats*; a theme less emphasized than the tragedy, less clearly worked out—perhaps unintentional—but nevertheless very much a part of the structure of the book: that is, the analysis of the present state of civilization in Australia.

Eddie is uneducated; Clive and another character, George Shammar, are intellectuals; the central character and narrator, Mick Reynolds, who “mixes” equally well with both, and whose personality is a blend of the two types, may be considered a representative Australian of his generation. As such, he is in many respects as nearly “typical” as could reasonably be expected: a cricketer of Test standard with a naïve and touching pride in his ability to “quote from twenty books”.

This symbology—if it was indeed the author's intention—cannot be followed too closely. As is usual with first-person characters, Mick Reynolds is not altogether clearly projected. His monumental egotism, shown in the early chapters by his refusal to play cricket unless he is begged to, and in the Tobruk section by his refusal to accept a medal, and his insistence on remaining in the line when wounded—his own explanation of these episodes, that he didn't want his girl to learn he was in Tobruk, is far from convincing—is obviously not intended as a satire on the national character.

There is some unsatisfactory characterization here, and there is some unsatisfactory construction in the early chapters relating to Mick Reynolds's life in a town called Nerridale. The author's intention must have been to submit this section as typical of the life of the Diggers before they joined the A.I.F.; and if—helped as it is by a prologue about Tobruk—it is read with this understanding, it "works" well enough. It might have been better to begin the book at the camp at Ingleburn, bringing in the Nerridale background in retrospect. But, compared with the weight and power of the novel once it gets into its stride, this is a small matter.

As a whole, it is a novel not of faults but of excellences: excellent in its dialogue, excellent in its characterization, excellent in its development, excellent in its several crises and unforgettably excellent as a picture of the Australians in action at Tobruk. As Norman Lindsay says in his foreword, "We have had many brilliant enough sketches of the Digger in action; this is his full-length portrait, and painted life-size, too."

Tobruk was a man-sized theme to attempt, and Glassop has handled it manfully. He has given as honest a picture of war as one could ask for, afraid neither of the squalid nor the heroic; and he has given an equally honest picture of the men who fight in wars, knowing depths and heights that none of them could possibly have conceived in the days of peace in their Nerridales.

## POETRY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

As A. G. Stephens perceived when he said of Brennan's work "On the whole we sit and admire a performance we do not often join", there are limits to the appeal of autobiography in verse.

Or, rather, there are limits to the appeal of unhappy autobiography. When Burns cries out in the happiest poem in the language

Corn rigs an' barley rigs  
An' corn rigs are bonnie.  
I'll ne'er forget that happy night  
Amang the rigs wi' Annie;

or when McCrae sings

Then O, awake, Elizabeth,  
The dawn is in the aspen-tree,  
The air is rich with honey-breath . . .  
Come out, my love, and dance with me.

it is impossible to imagine a reader failing to respond.

We can immediately relate the song of joy to moments of joy in our own lives; the poet is speaking for the reader. And besides, we are delighted to share his happiness.

But when the poetry is essentially unhappy, when a Brennan declares he is shut out of the houses of his fellows and out of his own heart, we begin to defend ourselves. Why should we be made miserable?

And yet—

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang—

Shakespeare's sonnets are personal poetry, they are "unhappy" in the sense that they are full of rage and struggle and agony, and they are read by everyone, read willingly, read with delight.

Clearly there are cases in which the reader's defences can be beaten down. It is not a sufficient explanation to say that Shakespeare was a very great man and that consequently everything he wrote is of interest. The interest of scholars there might be; and human curiosity; but the sonnets are read with delight.

They are read because the technique is not merely good but strikingly so; because, taken as a whole, they hold the interest as a kind of narrative poem; because they contain a balance of happiness with unhappiness; because every man can relate them to his own moods—they have "universality", they are not just a private conversation by the author with himself or his lady; and they are read because in their deepest agonies of rage and despair they go beyond mere unhappiness into that ultimate intensity of emotion which Matthew Arnold said was a kind of black delight, and which Aristotle said had the power of "purging" the reader of his own troubles and griefs. It is always delightful to humanity to see someone "getting it properly in the neck", always consoling to know that Shakespeare had a worse time in love than the rest of us.

These notes have been made because Kenneth Mackenzie's *The Moonlit Doorway* has to be assessed as personal or autobiographical poetry.

God will requite you, Captain Spite,  
for having steered my ship so far  
without the benefit of beacon,  
across a thousand years of night  
towards the frozen Polar star.  
God only knows by what you reckon  
landfall so foul, and by what light  
you take me where the portals are  
of truth and lies, and with what right  
you spurn the fury of seas that sicken  
blackly behind this harbour bar.

My ship! My ship! A curse upon you—  
you who were agent of this dealing. . . .

That is certainly not Hugh McCrae singing "Come out, my love, and dance with me", not a happy personal poetry. Whether as unhappy personal poetry—the technique obviously being competent—it is to be warded off as dispiriting, "a performance one admires but does not join", or accepted in the way that Shakespeare's sonnets are accepted depends on the reader's personal reaction to it. Because the writing is sharp and dramatic, because the emotion does reach an ultimate intensity, because the effect is not of despair but defiance, and because it is an emotion everyone has felt at times—

My ship, my lovely ship is here;  
my ship, my fate to this bay came,  
and on this ghastly beach is laid—

this seems a poem that will be accepted.

Certainly that is the case with "The Union", in which the human fear of death, coming into the poet's mind when he is sitting up late and alone, is transmuted into awe:

Death at the dreaming candle sips  
and death sits down upon my chair  
and tastes the breath between my lips,  
the ebb and swell of midnight air.

And death is in my very thought:  
here in this room we two are one,  
into one timeless being wrought,  
as though my earthly life were done. . . .

The moonlight and the candlelight  
burn in death's shadow, sink and die  
across the loneliness of night:  
but we are eternal, death and I.

Some of the poems of despair, as when the poet pictures himself "sprawled dead upon the plain of time, churned by the worms of living memories", are more difficult to accept: worms are not exactly sparkling company. And some

of the love poems—which do not as a whole amount to an exciting narrative, as do the Shakespearean sonnets—are too much like a private conversation. Though always well written, they do not speak for Everyman, but only for the poet; they do not speak to every woman, but only to one.

Mackenzie's personal poetry attains the necessary balance by those love poems which, though they may be dramatized by threats of doom, spring from the joy of love and the beauty of the beloved: notably, the sixth of the "Eight Sonnets", "What the Mirror Said", "The Kiss", "I Saw the Moon Set in Your Memory" and—the outstanding poem of the 1943 *Australian Poetry*—"The Moonlit Doorway". Anyone would gladly share the emotion of these.

And the book as a whole is balanced not only by this group of verses—and by the images of beauty flashing out everywhere among the love poems—but by the many non-personal, non-autobiographical poems included. There are two captivating sonnets about a spider; "Heat", the most Australian of Mackenzie's verses; "I Love Little Pussy"—a remarkable display of technical fireworks; "The Wild Man", a fine tribute to Hugh McCrae's poetry; impressions of Don Juan, Don Quixote and Villon—too literary, perhaps, for contemporary taste, but all lively and skilful works; and "A Fairy Tale", which, arising from the image of a sleeping child under the threat of air-raids, sums up the whole tragedy of war in lines of astonishing and unforgettable beauty.

Considerably larger than the average "slim volume", *The Moonlit Doorway* is a selection from the much greater number of short poems Kenneth Mackenzie has written. The autobiographical impulse and a certain levelness of tone are his dangers; this book, *Our Earth* and his novels are his achievement—and a fine one; his promise lies in his practically faultless technique and in the fact that he can escape from the personal into objective creation.



## THE GIFT FROM THE SKY

"JOHN CLARE's gift fell upon him direct from the sky," says Norman Gale in his introduction to the Rugby edition of the gentle, pastoral poetry of this minor contemporary of Wordsworth and Byron. The same could be said of Shaw Neilson, who sang literally "as the birds sing", his poems coming into his mind first as a tune which he hummed as he walked or worked in the country.

James Devaney, who knew Shaw Neilson well, has set down what he knows in *Shaw Neilson*; and, within his limits, has done well. It is a picture of the "rustic" poet, immediately calling up recollections of Clare, Burns and W. H. Davies. Working as a labourer, Neilson had "about two hundred different jobs" over a period of thirty years.

Some of the jobs, as when he was working on an aerial tram high above a reservoir, were dangerous—"A mistake . . . would have meant that one of us, truck and all, would have been hurled on to the rocks down below"; some were both dangerous and brutal:

My first job [in the quarry] was in a pig-shoot, letting the spawls down the shoot towards the crusher. I got my shins very badly barked, and had bruises on them for twelve months afterwards . . . . I was taken off that job and put on filling the trucks on the floor of the quarry. Jim and I were mates there for about three weeks. Jim had done a lot of quarry work and spawling. He said the job was altogether too dangerous, and that I was in danger of getting killed at any time.

It was the middle of summer and my glasses were always foggy with sweat. Often I could not see what I was doing. Several times a day a big boulder shaped like a grindstone would roll like lightning past me. Jim continually predicted that I would be smashed. . . . The main trouble was that all our spawlers, with one exception, were amateurs. They had no idea of making anything safe for the men working below. After about three weeks I had a particularly

narrow shave with a big boulder one day. I asked for my time and left the next morning.

The rustic poet is lucky in one way, the luckiest of all the writing tribe, in that his work comes to him easily. Shaw Neilson hummed his songs along country roads or lay in bed in the early morning with "pieces" tumbling into his brain. The gift "comes from the sky", a natural purity and simplicity of style, and practically all the poet has to do is to take down the words as they arrive. The work might come slowly at times, as Devaney shows in a fascinating description of Neilson dictating a poem to him, but it did not have to be fought for with the agony of major creative effort. If a "piece" wouldn't flow smoothly for him Neilson put it away for weeks or months till it "came right" of its own accord.

But the rustic poet pays the price of art all the same. Neilson sweated in his quarries and all but lost his eyesight; W. H. Davies drove himself out of adventure and into poetry by losing his leg in a train accident. By comparison with Clare, the Australian poet escaped lightly. And he escaped, it seems, because, although he was encouraged by A. G. Stephens and J. F. Archibald, made good friends in the literary world and was provided with a job in the office of the Country Roads Board, Melbourne, he was never too much lionized and pampered by well-meaning admirers.

But for the differences of time and place and the peculiarity of Norman Gale's style, this paragraph on the opening of Clare's career could have been written by Devaney of Shaw Neilson:

It is easy to detect signs of a spirit triumphantly unfitted for residence in a clay hovel at Helpstone. As luck would have it, a kind of rough-and-ready poetry was not altogether out of the boy's reach, for his father's head was stuffed with innumerable odds-and-ends of rhyme, some of which he was in the habit of reciting to his son. Entertainment of the same sort was obtainable from old Granny Bains, a weatherworn cowherd, to whom the future poet was attracted by her store of ditties; whose especial cronies were the the wind and rain.

Clare's life of labour began with his service as "factotum at the Blue Bell" at Helpstone; then, at 16, he fell vainly in love with his Patty; he became a stone-cutter and then a cobbler, then a gardener; took to drink; came weeping back to the "clay hovel" and, working on the farm, composed his verses and became noted for his "timidity, shyness, strange manners, fits of abstraction". He fell in love with two women more or less simultaneously and, because it became highly advisable, married the one he had quarrelled with—"No sooner was the first quarrel between the sweet-hearts swept away by the broom of reconciliation," says Norman Gale delightfully, "than the flame of passion, burning to a conquering height, made a bonfire out of the broken materials of virtue." What followed in Clare's life is a mixture of the pathetic and the appalling.

London society made a lion of him, and he is seen shrinking in the corner of fashionable drawing-rooms, absurd in his smock-coat and hobnailed boots. He writes such ardent and gushing letters to a patroness that, embarrassed, she is forced to ask him to return a portrait she had given him. He stays with the Reverend H. T. Cary and makes love to the reverend gentleman's young and handsome wife under the impression that she is his daughter. He drinks; he goes mad and imagines he is married to the Patty he had loved long ago when he was sixteen.

What he wrote about his career might be applied also to Shaw Neilson:

Ah, little did I think in time that's past,  
By summer burnt or numb'd by winter's blast,  
Delving the ditch a livelihood to earn,  
Or lumping corn out in a dusty barn;  
With aching bones returning home at night  
And sitting down with weary hand to write;  
Ah, little did I think, as then unknown,  
Those artless rhymes I even blush'd to own  
Would one day be applauded and approv'd,  
By learning notic'd and by genius lov'd.

But Shaw Neilson escaped Clare's tragedy. Perhaps his mind was better balanced; perhaps he was a far less emotional man—with the usual timidity of the Australian biographer, Devaney is elusive about Neilson's affairs of the heart, but he manages to convey the impression that there simply weren't any; and certainly Neilson didn't have to withstand the glare of publicity that dazed and bewildered Clare and destroyed his peace of mind.

Norman Gale is only half right when he says that Clare showed "a spirit triumphantly unfitted for residence in a clay hovel"; for it is also true that his spirit was totally unfitted for exhibition in a London mansion. Which should not be interpreted as an argument for ignoring the rustic poet; but which suggests that the moderate and careful assistance Shaw Neilson had was just about right. An easy job in the country would probably have been the best thing for him.

It is a tribute to Devaney's ability as a biographer that Neilson can thus be discussed in comparison with Clare, for it shows that his hero does emerge as a living figure. Devaney has set out—indefensibly—to write a book that "gives no thought to style", is not an attempt to "place" the poet and is to amount to no more than "a simple intimate book that lovers of Shaw Neilson would like to have". For the sake of *belles lettres* in this country, a writer of Devaney's ability should surely attempt a full biography. But his achievement outruns his intentions.

Inevitably he helps to "place" Neilson in the front rank of Australian lyrists and somewhere between Clare and Davies in English literature as a whole; he adopts Boswell's method of presentation and does exceptionally well with it; and the portrait of his hero, if not quite complete, is thoroughly honest—notably in his astonishing picture of the poet on his visit to Devaney's home in old age; where, when a visitor's loud voice troubled him, Shaw Neilson left

the room and returned with his ears stuffed with cotton-wool.

A further merit is that through incidental portraits of such notabilities as A. G. Stephens and Christopher Brennan—the spectacle of Neilson thunderstruck at Brennan's conversation is unforgettable—the book gives a fairly comprehensive survey of the period.

## A MAKER OF MELBOURNE

THE first scientist who contrives to make a man in a test-tube will probably be burnt at the stake or given an earldom. And in the meantime there is considerable excitement about the fact that somebody has kept the heart of a chicken alive for a few years. As a corrective to over-enthusiasm for the feats of science it might be kept in mind that Achilles and Agamemnon, as created by Homer, have been alive since the tenth or eleventh century B.C.

The relevance of this to the publication of Frank Wilmot's *Poems* is that Wilmot created a city. A city where

The knots of slimy eels writhe under the rustic bridge,  
The sunbeams burrow among the quivering elms,  
The tufts of cloud throw shade on the level lawns,  
Where a world is clean and green;  
And all the way from Caulfield station to town  
The encroaching pigface pours  
Its molten magenta down the sides of the cuttings.

It might be objected, of course, that the man made in a test-tube will be a "real" man, or that Wilmot (he signed his poems "Furnley Maurice", was manager of Melbourne University Press and died in 1942) was not a navvy who built a "real" city; but that is to suggest that a fact is more real than an image—a proposition obviously absurd when millions of "real" men have lived and died and passed utterly from the memory of mankind, while Achilles and Agamemnon, Medea and Cleopatra, Falstaff and Macbeth still tower in the minds of men as vividly as the day they were created. The "real" Melbourne could be blown off the face of the earth tomorrow; literature outlasts civilizations.

This is the real mystery and achievement of art, and it is why the public, however it may admire the mechanical ingenuity of the scientist, speaks of the artist as "inspired"—or did in more reverent ages. The landscape painter or poet makes trees and clouds and mountains for men's otherwise desolate minds; the visionary makes gods and devils and witches and bunyips—"forms more real than living man", in Shelley's phrase; and the writers whom men, with pardonable self-approval, call the greatest, make men—Achilles, Falstaff. From this point of view it might well be argued that the most important achievement in Australian poetry to date is Kenneth Slessor's creation of Captain Dobbin; and, though a balladist is not quite the same sort of animal as a poet, it is to be remembered that "Banjo" Paterson made a man from Snowy river.

Conrad said the creative writer's task was to "make see"; poets in medieval times were called "makers". What precisely, then, does Frank Wilmot make us see; what did he make?

A horse, certainly. An unforgettable horse. He comes into what is probably the best of Wilmot's "Melbourne Odes", "The Victoria Markets Recollected in Tranquillity":

An old horse with a pointed hip  
And dangling disillusioned under-lip  
Stands in a harvest-home of cabbage leaves  
And grieves.

Well, it is something to have given a horse to literature. Something less than to give an Achilles or a Cleopatra; but still something far more difficult and far more valuable than it may appear. Besides, the horse in the Victoria Markets isn't only a horse; it is also a wry, comic, sardonic self-portrait, a "picture of the artist as an old horse".

All the way through this ingeniously constructed ode there run two themes in a sort of counterpoint. Ironically parodying a line from "Rule Britannia":

*When Batman first at Heaven's command—*

Wilmot sets up in the reader's mind the absurd and pompous music of the conventional triumphal ode that might have been written to celebrate Melbourne's centenary and sets up too—a shade wistfully, perhaps, because he would have liked to have lived in Wordsworth's times and to have written an elaborate and ceremonious poetry—an image of the sort of poet with a capital P who could seriously have believed that Heaven had sent Batman to Melbourne.

Then, moving counter to this theme, mocking it through all the mazes of the Victoria Markets, past the vegetable stalls, past the butter and the poultry and the meat and the rabbits, past the dolefully second-hand clothes and the infinitely second-hand books, disguised as the old horse the poet plods with his grieving under-lip, his realistic eye, his stout heart and his mournfully humorous mind.

Gentle curates and slaughtermen  
Murder the cattle in the pen:  
Body, Spirit, the Word, the Breath  
Only survive by so much death.  
The old horse with the pointed hip  
And disillusioned under-lip  
Stands in a drift of cabbage leaves  
And grieves.

There are crudities in the "Melbourne Odes", not only the technical infelicities that occur everywhere in Wilmot's poetry, but unpleasant sarcasms and cheap jokes. Nevertheless, their humour is their chief virtue. It keeps the poetry real. It makes the poet real.

In all his poetry Wilmot created no man or woman: no human being except himself. Light sketches there are; a glimpse of a woman in some love lyrics; an old Chinaman in the Markets; an impression always of the vast and vague mass of mankind, pictured in some memorable lines:

A force that throngs the byways and the streets,  
A dark, enormous influence that pours  
Its passion through the light and vainly beats  
On spired churches and closed college doors—



but no man or woman drawn at full length, painted "in the round".

In his early and middle periods Wilmot "made" surprisingly little of anything. The earliest poems are largely devoted to the announcement that he has extremely poetical "dreams"; but what those "dreams" are (a common fault of immature poetry this, noticeable sometimes in Shaw Neilson) he fails to specify. If a man comes up to you and says he had a dream about a pink elephant or, like Blake, about a tiger burning bright, he is "making" something; if he merely announces that he has poetical dreams he creates nothing except a vague sort of portrait of himself as a man of dreams.

In his middle period we find a much stronger Frank Wilmot writing with passion, with agony, with tortured honesty about the 1914 war; writing with an intense sincerity that whips his homespun style into an impressive eloquence.

What lives, what is "made" by these poems? There is no picture of battle, no portrait of a soldier, but a cry of tormented humanity.

An *old* cry. It is curious how quickly topical poetry fades. The first World War was not so long ago; every word Frank Wilmot wrote of it can be applied to the second; yet the poems read with a strange, pathetic remoteness, seeming as far from present realities as Wordsworth's sonnets about Napoleon . . . themselves now "old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago". It is the image that lives most vividly in art, the thing made; the sudden little flash of light that reveals a tree as it has never been seen before, or the great glow through which a Falstaff emerges in the fullness of his humanity; not high thinking, but rich making. What remains most alive in these war poems is again a picture of the author: how he struggled with the stubbornness of words, how he won to a minor triumph, how he wrestled in thought, how poignantly and sharply he saw the irreconcilable duality of man's nature and the gods', how ruthlessly and fiercely honest he was.

Having tried hard to be a poet of "dreams" and then a philosopher, Wilmot also struggled to be a poet of nature; and, as with all except a couple of stanzas of Bernard O'Dowd's "The Bush", it is really astonishing how little of nature is in his nature poetry.

There are, of course, some glimpses of the landscape in "The Gully"—a "baby bracken spray" in the first stanza, "tall, ghostly gums in glacial silence dressed" in the second, "the mellow clamor of the cattle-bells" in the third; but, unless the four or five lines about the gums in the snow stay in the mind, you can read the long poem from end to end without coming across a single memorable picture. Much is said, and said with some eloquence; nothing is made. And this Frank Wilmot admitted. The rocks would have to give to some other poet, he said in trite but modest phrases, their "awesome majesty"; somebody else would have to create in literature the "tranquil elegancies" of the gums.

"Measure me by my love and let me go," he said. And that is precisely how "The Gully" must be measured. It is not a picture of the gully so much as a statement of the poet's love for it; not a creation of the bush but a segment of the author's mind; and so, once again, a self-portrait.

Take the "dreamer", the philosopher tortured about war, the lover of the bush and the wry humorist of the "Melbourne Odes" and you have a pretty complete portrait of Frank Wilmot. It is a strong but not a great picture. A writer needs to be a Walt Whitman if his faults of technique are to be rated unimportant beside the vigour of his personality, if we are to remember him as a man and forget that he tried to be a maker.

Apart from the strong but yet minor attraction of his personality, Frank Wilmot's claim to survival lies in his "Melbourne Odes". Here he did create something, and something more than a picture of his own mind.

The writing is rough, crude, violent; the reader will find "no gracious burbling nor arts to please" he roars in one of his impossible phrases:

No gracious burbling nor arts to please,  
 No hypocritical felicities.  
 Buy and be damned to you! Sell and be damned also!  
 Decry the goods, he'll tell you where to go!

Always muddled, wavering from false romanticism to crude colloquialism, Frank Wilmot never achieved style. But by solving the major problem of construction he largely atoned for his uneasiness with the minor niceties of technique. And—"Buy or be damned to you!"—the speed and passion of the odes carry them roughshod over their own faults. A touch of roughness may be necessary—is certainly sometimes attractive—when rough scenes are to be painted.

Wilmot was busy creating:

Gobbling turkeys and ducks in crates,  
 Pups in baskets and trays of eggs. . . .  
 Rabbits skinned in a pink nude row,  
 Little brown kidneys out on show.  
 "Cheap today, lady, cheap today."  
 Slimy fish slide off the tray.  
 Women pondering with a sigh—  
 "Spend or perish, buy or die!"  
 Packed with babies and Brussels sprouts  
 It's a rickety pram for a woman to shove—

and creating thereby the whole rich, earthy life of the city of Melbourne, and he simply couldn't be bothered with "gracious burbling". It was a rickety pram for a poet to shove, there's no doubt about that; but it was packed with real babies and real Brussels sprouts, and Wilmot "shoved" it along real streets in a real city.

## A CHAMPION OF THE ARTS

It was said of Wellington in the Peninsula that in moments of doubt and anxiety the sight of his nose was worth ten thousand men. Scott, too, had a lion's heart. He has encouragement in his voice and presence. He stirs the heart like a trumpet.

One might have expected W. Macneile Dixon thus to respond to Walter Scott. The great man had his faults, certainly: his impossible heroes and heroines, his slovenly construction, his occasional lapses—especially in his poetry—into theatricality. But also he had tremendous virtues; and the greatest of these, his love for the heroic in man, is a quality sadly lacking in contemporary literature. As Macneile Dixon perceives.

“Our century,” he says in a striking phrase in *An Apology for the Arts*—“Our century ponders, like Hamlet with the skull in his hand.” Despite all the achievements of science, “disappointment with life, aversion from life, even hatred of it are plainly written in the books of our times”.

What, then, has happened? To say all in a word, Scott was a Romantic and a hero-worshipper, and we have ceased to be Romantics and hero-worshippers. He was a poet. We have lost faith in poets, and transferred our allegiance from poetry to science.

He looked out upon the great panorama of human life with unconcealed delight: we regard it with anxiety and misgiving. He was quick to love, to believe, to admire. We are sceptical and critical, quick to doubt, to decry and to defame.

He came before Darwin and Freud, and was persuaded of man's kinship with the angels. We are persuaded of his much closer kinship with the animals.

He thought nobly of the soul. “The soul?” we ask. “What is that?” Honour and chivalry were for him words of profound depth and meaning. Words such as these occur but seldom in the vocabulary of modern authors. They have dropped out of use.

He praised glory and patriotism. With us glory and patriotism are both under suspicion. He had a passion for valiant deeds.

"I, Walter Scott, of Abbotsford, a poor scholar, no soldier, but a soldier's lover", he called himself. He never doubted that death in his country's cause was the noblest a man could die. "Never let me hear that brave blood has been shed in vain," he cried, "it sends an imperious challenge down through all the generations."

We speak of wars and battles with loathing, and declare the lives they take as wholly thrown away, as madly wasted. One might have imagined that at least the magnificent heroism, the fortitude, the self-sacrifice displayed by men of all nations in the late war would have inspired modern writers. Not so, they have no eyes for them, do not rejoice in them or praise them, but are plunged in the deepest dejection.

Such generalizations can never be wholly true. The novels of Conrad and the poetry of Yeats—proud, aristocratic, seeking always to dignify man and at the last to make him gay—would have to be admitted as honourable exceptions; and even among the most recent writers, among the generation of weeping poets, Cecil Day Lewis has always been attracted towards the heroic. Macneile Dixon has the one failing—common to all elderly observers since Adam's hair turned grey—of imagining that the entire youth of the world is going to the dogs.

Also, it might be argued that the gloom of modern writing is no more than a fashion; which will pass as all fashions pass. One that is gone already, if Lawson Glassop's *We Were the Rats* and the general movement towards gaiety and courage in Australian and New Zealand writing can be taken as indications. Glassop evaded no tragic fact of war; but he was certainly not plunged in dejection; he did rejoice over the heroism, the fortitude, the self-sacrifice of the A.I.F.; and Scott would have liked his novel.

Nevertheless, Macneile Dixon's generalizations are true enough, and far too true. "Our century ponders, like Hamlet with the skull in his hand" might have been written expressly of the surrealist movements in poetry and painting that seemed to be making some headway in Australia while the men were away at the war. And stories, plays or poems about Australian soldiers are still more often than not merely dismal. It is true enough, as Macneile Dixon says, that:

The world today is full of clever writers, immensely cleverer than Scott. He was not, thank God, a clever writer. He has no witticisms. Yet not a man of them, for all their glitter, can bend as he bent the great bow, the bow of Ulysses. When I ponder it I cannot avoid the conviction that it is not so much talent as the great soul that makes the great writer.

"It is the great soul that makes the great writer." That is the core of Macneile Dixon's thought: and he thinks better about the arts than any other contemporary critic. He is so much more human than T. S. Eliot. He stands with Llewellyn and John Cowper Powys as a worshipper of life in literature and, though lacking something of their force and passion, builds a stronger and more complete case than Llewellyn and a more coherent one than his brother. Reading him, one remembers Hazlitt and Matthew Arnold.

*An Apology for the Arts* repeats to some extent, and in a slighter way, the arguments put forward in Macneile Dixon's memorable *The Human Situation*. But readers familiar with his outlook will find plenty of fresh interest in his application of it to such figures as Scott, Wordsworth, Tolstoi, Thomas Campbell and Chatterton—on each of whom he submits essays—and in his chapters on "English and Scottish Ballads" and "The Romantic Revival". It says enough for his critical acumen to record that he has unearthed from the vast morasses and mountain ranges of Wordsworth ("The greatest enemy of materialism") a verse as lovely as:

The stars of midnight shall be dear  
To her; and she shall lean her ear  
In many a secret place  
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,  
And beauty born of murmuring sound  
Shall pass into her face.

His appreciation of the ballad—and the same sort of revealing contrast could be found by placing passages of "Banjo" Paterson beside the more pretentious verse of his period—is indicated by the comparison of one of Pope's "most admired epigrams":

'Tis from high life high characters are drawn:  
A saint in crepe is twice a saint in lawn—

with "the antique vigour of the ballad":

The King sits in Dumfermline town  
Drinking the bluid-red wine.

Macneile Dixon is thoroughly consistent in his point of view—that is one of the great pleasures in reading him. He knows his subjects, but all professors know their subjects: this man also knows his own mind. He is for Scott and against the sad little men with the skulls in their hands. He is for Wellington's nose and against Salvador Dali's liver. He can say with Browning,

Aeschylus' bronze-throat, eagle-bark for blood  
Has somewhat spoilt my taste for twitterings.

He is for the king and his blood-red wine and against Pope and his epigrams. He is, in short, as he is proud to admit, for the Romantic and against what is miscalled the Classic:

If we would sum up our impressions we may think of the Romantic Revival as the revolt of the natural man against the artificial, the revolt of the imagination and the feelings against the insolent domination of the intelligence in the literature of England from Dryden to Dr Johnson.

And why—after paying due tribute to their measure of technical skill—should he be against Pope and Dryden and the rumbling platitudes of Johnson? Why should he take his stand with Keats and Shelley and Byron and Wordsworth; with Browning and Shakespeare and those remarkably unclassical classics Aeschylus and Euripides? The test, again, is greatness of soul; natural man as against artificial, living art against the mechanical exercise of a faculty.

Dryden and Pope and Johnson exhibit the qualities of simplicity, repose, precision, and these have been named as classic qualities. But they attain them by limiting the scope of their undertakings. They are simple because they deal only with the familiar facts of life; calm, because they have never known what it is to be profoundly moved; precise, because they merely repeat in terser phrase

the current opinions of the time. Simplicity, repose, precision are only admirable and precious, are only *classic*, when threatened by imaginative wealth, emotional fervour, intellectual profundity. But the poets of the Augustan age were in perfect security from these splendid dangers.

The greatest art, Macneile Dixon believes, is that which deals in "splendid dangers". Not squalid dangers, petty dangers, miserable dangers; but "splendid" dangers. And that is because life itself, of which art is more than the mirror—the secret meaning manifest—is both dangerous and splendid: "We are taking part in cosmic affairs, of a magnitude beyond all imagination to compass or language to express."

When you enter the temple of the arts you enter a building dedicated to the Muses, and the soul is there disturbed by a sense of how great and terrible, how strange and beautiful is this universe of ours. Make human life as trivial as you please, there remains the simple, positive, undeniable fact among the other facts—the eating and drinking, walking and talking—that we are taking part in cosmic affairs, of a magnitude beyond all imagination to compass or language to express. All finite things have their roots in the infinite and if you wish to understand life at all you cannot tear it out of its context. And that context, astounding even to bodily eyes, is the heaven of stars and the incredible procession of the great galaxies.

The artist, then, is to attempt to compass the infinite, to express the inexpressible, to remind man that he is taking part in cosmic affairs.

There is, of course, a certain danger in this definition; for the humourist is not to be expected to keep his eyes on the heavens, except in momentary glances to remind him that it is because the butcher, the baker, the housewife and the politician are possibly exiled angels that he finds their antics so ludicrous; nor is the poet always to be looking for spirits, spooks or fairies. But of these essential qualifications Macneile Dixon is well aware.

The artist, he says, is to show that *while firmly on the earth*, "eating, drinking, walking and talking", man is taking part in cosmic affairs. To show, in effect, that Wel-



lington's nose, fixed to his face though it is, extends miraculously among the stars.

This is the sense in which Macneile Dixon finds the arts divine, "essentially religious". And man, he declares, knows in his heart that the arts are of the most profound religious significance to him. In all of them—poetry, painting, music, sculpture—there is the mystery of rhythm to which a man's whole being surrenders as his mind does when listening to a tune: rhythm that "illuminates the world in the passage of light, controls the winds and the waves, all the organic processes of our bodies, the sleeping and waking, the pulsing of the heart and lungs", and moves mysteriously through the arts, holding man spellbound; rhythm that is "the soul's native tongue and needs no learning". When a man comes face to face with a great work of art, he says—

It is then that suddenly the whole scene of existence is perceived in its overwhelming immensity, its true dimensions. What may it or may it not contain? It is then that the values of this fleeting world are weighed in the balance. Even the plain man is exposed to this strange peril. He finds an inexplicable fascination in these enigmatic arts. He may not take them seriously. Yet some secret sympathy, some inborn loyalty draws him, do what he will, to admire, to listen and to gaze. . . . How surprising its presence, how serene the passage of that star—the love of loveliness—through the cloudy and tempestuous heavens of human history.

It sounds a sentimental phrase, that "love of loveliness". And yet, if it is remembered that there are tragic loveliness and gay and splendid loveliness, it is precisely what the arts are concerned with. Man is concerned with it, in love with the sublime and terrible loveliness of the universe and its reflection in the fine arts, or his life on earth has no meaning—is "nasty, brutish and short". Civilizations are concerned with it, or they are not civilized. "It is at least my own conviction that for civilization, in any shape or form worthy admiration, the arts are the main pillars or, rather, the architects and builders," says Macneile Dixon. "Without them it has never arisen and cannot arise; without them it cannot and will not stand."

## DEEP IN THE JUNGLE

"MR GALLAGHER," said Mr Shean, "*Ariadne arose*"—

"From her couch in the snows?" asked Mr Gallagher. "Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to have Shelley quoted to me half an hour after breakfast, but I wish you would quote him correctly."

"I had a notion," said Mr Shean, "that it wasn't Ariadne who arose."

"*Arethusa arose*," said Mr Gallagher. "Ariadne, for all I know, stayed in bed."

"It's a peculiar thing," said Mr Shean, "but in Mr Ben Hecht's *Miracle in the Rain* an American soldier, giving to quoting poetry, informs us that Ariadne arose, and Mr Hecht gives no indication that he is in any way perturbed by this injustice to the energetic Arethusa."

"Odd indeed," said Mr Gallagher. "I have had a tolerably high opinion of Mr Hecht as a writer."

"Another peculiar thing," said Mr Shean, "is that Mr Hecht imagines that Guadalcanal is a town; or so I infer from his statement that the soldier is in action in 'the jungle surrounding Guadalcanal'. I think that somebody should have informed him that Guadalcanal, covered with jungle as it may be, is surrounded, like most islands, by water."

"Odd again," said Mr Gallagher. "But these perhaps are small matters. Mr Hecht has presumably written another of his brilliant fantasies."

"Allow me," said Mr Shean, "to quote you a sample of Mr Hecht's style: 'Another day was ending in New York. A girl walked in the spring rain that bombarded 34th Street. The rain and the twilight hid her. You could see only that she was young, poor and graceful. The girl was carrying a number of bundles.' You perceive, Mr Gallagher,

the stock opening for the fashionable short story; the stutter of short sentences, the presentation of the anonymous girl. I am afraid that Mr Hecht has been reading Hemingway."

"Usually," said Mr Gallagher, "they begin like this: 'The man lurched out of the pub. He was drunk. The dog saw the man fall into the gutter. He came up and sniffed at the man. The man snarled. The dog wagged his tail. The man bit it.' I don't mind that so very much, for it is tough guy's stuff and tough guys make me laugh. I am afraid, though, that a nervous trembling afflicts my knees when tough guy writers turn their attention to poor young girls in the rain. They tend to become sentimental; tough guys with heads of bone have hearts of rose-petals, I am afraid."

"This poor girl," said Mr Shean, "has a mother who has not spoken a word for, if I remember rightly, ten years. Mother has been deserted by her husband and she 'just sits and stares and cries sometimes'."

"Never tell me," said Mr Gallagher, "that the poor girl meets a fate worse than death and makes Mother cry some more."

"We are spared that," said Mr Shean. "For a long time I was puzzled about Mother. I couldn't see what she was doing in this long short story at all. She just sits and stares and cries sometimes and, merry as these proceedings are, they seem to have no point whatever. Eventually I discovered why she is in the story. The poor girl is pirated by the soldier in the street, and she takes him home to Mother. She is poor, but so singularly honest that she is never alone with the soldier for a moment. Mother is there as a chaperone."

"And very nice, too," said Mr Gallagher. "But how does the soldier like it?"

"Oddly—I told you this was a very odd book"—said Mr Shean, "the soldier loves Mother. He just sits there at the piano 'playing and singing and loving them—her and her mother'."

"I am beginning to love everybody myself," said Mr Gallagher. "A state of mind I find unnatural. Does this

poor goof spend his entire time singing and playing and loving Mother and crying?"

"I forgot," said Mr Shean. "He takes the poor girl to a theatre—accompanied, of course, by another chaperone, Miss Ullman, who has a 'red nose and watery squinting eyes'—and the poor girl stares at the stage 'with her mouth opened in a continuous smile of delight'."

"You don't mean to tell me," said Mr Gallagher, "that she is dippy, too?"

"Mr Hecht doesn't appear to think so," said Mr Shean. "But I have my suspicions."

"Well," said Mr Gallagher, "here we have a poor girl, possibly dippy, with a dippy mother and a soldier boyfriend. It all sounds a trifle eccentric, but not exactly miraculous so far."

"Kissing the poor girl good-bye," said Mr Shean, "the soldier goes off to the jungles surrounding Guadalcanal and is killed in action. The girl has given him a Roman coin for a talisman and when, after many vicissitudes, including a sneezing fit and pneumonia, she dies in the rainy street, she is found miraculously clutching the keepsake in her hand. As the soldier had taken it into the aforesaid jungle surrounding Guadalcanal I found the incident improbable. Mr Hecht's stories, though always tinged with sentimentality, have pleased me on occasion. I shall sit at a window for ten years, watching the rain and waiting for him to come back. I shall sit, I shall stare and sometimes, thinking of *Miracle in the Rain*, I shall cry."

"If Mother comes and sits miraculously beside you," said Mr Gallagher, "I advise you to brain her."

## DEMENTED GUINEA-PIGS

ANNOUNCER. Folks, are you listening there, way down in Tennessee? You darkies on the cottonfields of Alabama, you cowboys thundering the plains of Texas. Man, oh, man, crouching with a white face eating popcorn in the subways of New York—hello, hello, out there, you mighty American civilization, hope of the world, are you listening?

MAN. How do we know they ain't all switched off?

ANNOUNCER. I hope they *have* switched off. It's part of the play if they do and part of the play if they don't. Folks, you are listening to a brand-new play by William Saroyan, composed this very minute, being composed right now, and exactly on the lines of all the radio plays, stage plays, ballets and operas in his new book, *Razzle Dazzle*.

MAN. When does this new play begin?

ANNOUNCER. The play has already begun. This is the play. This uplifting, surging American voice reaching out over the ether to the hearts of American men and women and American children; in Tennessee, in Alabama, in Utah, in Oregon, in Washington, D.C.; to men who bitterly take aspirin; to women wondering how they are going to pay next week's rent; to children suffering from mumps, measles, whooping-cough and adenoids.

MAN. What's the name of this play?

ANNOUNCER. "Fourteen Demented Guinea-pigs."

MAN. Are there any guinea-pigs in it?

ANNOUNCER. No.

MAN. Well, in that case, I don't see why you can't call it "Fifty-seven Intoxicated Cockroaches".

ANNOUNCER. We *will* call it "Fifty-seven Intoxicated Cockroaches". It's a lovely title. It's fine. It's American. It's got oomph. It makes me think of stevedores labouring with

mighty muscles in the holds of ships from all over the world, resting like sleeping swans at the docks at San Francisco. It's just the title for this play. Folks, you are listening to a brand-new play by William Saroyan entitled "Three Hundred Thousand Blue-eyed Baboons".

MAN. What is this play about?

ANNOUNCER. Nothing.

MAN. You can't have a play about nothing.

ANNOUNCER. Why has the newsboy on the corner of West Fifty-seventh-street got a wart on the end of his nose? Why has the widow with seventeen children suddenly decided to run them all through the mangle? Who started the war? You don't know. Nobody knows. Nobody knows what it's all about. It's life. It's nothing. It's everything. That's what this play is about.

MAN. I'd like to listen to a play about a farm.

ANNOUNCER. All right. This *is* a play about a farm. You be the farmer.

MAN. Goody, goody, goody. What do I say?

ANNOUNCER. Say anything.

MAN. Them there hogs ain't as purty as they was when they was dancing young baconers.

ANNOUNCER. There you are. You can't go wrong. Now we've got a play about this American farmer way down in Tennessee who is heart-broken about his hogs. It's life. It's time. It's tragedy. It's comedy.

MAN. You can't have a play about a farm without a cow in it.

ANNOUNCER. O.K. We'll have a cow. Hey, bring in a cow.  
(*Footsteps of approaching cow are heard.*)

MAN. My, that's a lovely cow.

ANNOUNCER. Speak to us, cow.

Cow. Moo!

ANNOUNCER. There you are. The little boy he says, "Mom, why can't I be President of the United States?" The cow she say, "Moo." It's life.

Cow. Moo!

MAN. I'm going to milk this cow, and I'm going to raise

chickens and hogs, and I'll grow corn and potatoes and mangel-wurzels, and I'll be outdoors in rain, snow, hail, frost and all the different kinds of weather, and I'll get me a good wife and never be lonely any more.

Cow. Moo!

ANNOUNCER. Marry the cow.

MAN. I'd kinda like to talk to my wife sometimes. Supposing the hogs got fever and I was worried. This is a fine, handsome cow, all right, and she's an American citizen, but she can't say anything except "Moo".

Cow. What the hell else do you expect me to say? I'm a cow, aren't I?

MAN. Say, did you hear that? I'll bet that gave you a surprise.

ANNOUNCER. Nothing ever surprises me in a Saroyan play.

Cow. If I'm a cow I gotter say "Moo". And what's more I *like* saying "Moo". It might not mean anything to you, but it means a lot to me.

MAN. What's she lashing her tail for?

ANNOUNCER. Rage. The great emotions. American love, American hate. Passion. And what's more, she's quite right about saying "Moo". It might mean anything. Anything might mean anything. The thing to do is to say it and see how it goes.

Cow. Moo!

ANNOUNCER. There you are. "Moo!" The whole universe in a syllable. Everything means something. Everything means everything. You try it yourself and see.

MAN. Moo.

ANNOUNCER. Peace, it's wonderful. Folks, here's this fine American farmer mooing and cooing and wooing the fine American Friesian he's going to marry.

Cow. I ain't gonna marry this bozo. I'm gonna marry Errol Flynn and Charlie Chaplin.

MAN (*plaintively*). Moo!

ANNOUNCER. Ladies and gentlemen, I thought you were going to listen to a comedy, but it has turned out to be a tragedy. I think we had better have some bright, cheerful,

heart-warming American music. Cow, will you please sing "The Star-Spangled Banner"?

Cow. I don't like you.

MAN. What's she got her head down for?

ANNOUNCER. She looks as if she's going to charge something. It's life. It's war. It's American drive and push. She's going to charge the universe.

Cow. I'm going to charge *you*. Both of you. I don't like you. I don't like Saroyan. I don't like this play. At first I thought it might be amusing, but now I think it is just plain darned maddeningly silly. You'll be sorry you ever asked me into this studio.

ANNOUNCER. Moo, now. Moo, moo. Please now. Moo, moo, moo.

Cow. Death and damnation!

*(Frightful rumpus.)*

VOICE. Sorry for that interruption, listeners, to Mr Saroyan's beautiful new play. The announcer and the farmer have unfortunately been called away, out the window, on urgent business. The window is 439 storeys above street-level.



## A PORTRAIT OF SOUTHEY

HE wrote forty-five books, together with hundreds of short poems and a mass of journalism.

The total included five epic poems; biographies of Nelson and Wesley; a gigantic novel *The Doctor*; essays, critical and political; travel books; translations from the Spanish; *The History of Brazil* in three volumes; five volumes of *Lives of the British Admirals*—and all these as the result of no more than three hours' steady work a night, from 6.30 to 9.30.

He loved the macabre, the Oriental and the impossible; his own writings, his children, and—so Jack Simmons recalls in *Southey*—cats.

Pious and an extreme Tory in his later years, he was expelled from Westminster in his youth for writing in a scholars' magazine a protest against corporal punishment held to be blasphemous and seditious. At the age of 19 he estimated that he had written 35,000 lines of verse, of which he thought 10,000 had some merit.

Being young, idealistic, impractical and of a wonderful innocence concerning the nature of man, he dreamed of establishing a perfect society and, with Coleridge and others, talked of emigrating to America. The doctrine to be practised was called Pantisocracy, and the "twelve gentlemen of good education and liberal principles" who were to "embark with twelve ladies in April next" would live in a state of eternal bliss, studying, indulging in "Liberal discussions" and educating their children. Adam Smith had argued that only one man in twenty was productive, so they reasoned that if each of the twelve laboured for one-twentieth of his time they would produce enough food to satisfy their wants. It was noted, however, that "the regula-

tions relating to the females strike them as the most difficult". Exactly on what terms should divorce be permissible? pondered these as yet unmarried Utopians.

Coleridge, who was recuperating from a heart broken by Mary Evans, and experimentally flirting with a few other charmers, was uplifted by Pantisocracy into an engagement to Sara Fricker (the sister of Southey's beloved) and, despite some protests—"O Southey! bear with my weakness. To marry a woman whom I do not love . . ." was led to the altar. Mr Simmons is inclined to acquit Southey of the "charge" of forcing Coleridge into the match; but—though Coleridge's weakness was the real fault—he does not make out a very good case. Coleridge seems to have been even more afraid of Southey's lofty opinions than he was of marrying Sara Fricker.

Southey was for ever putting Coleridge in the wrong, and Coleridge, though he did what the other thought was his duty by rushing into a marriage bound to fail, was annoyed:

" . . . Southey! Precipitance is wrong. There may be too high a state of health, perhaps even *virtue* is liable to a *plethora*. I have been the slave of impulse, the child of imbecility. But my inconsistencies have given me a tardiness and reluctance to think ill of anyone. . . . Your undeviating simplicity of rectitude has made you rapid in decision. Having never erred, you feel more *indignation* at error than pity for it."

Coleridge's "inconsistencies", endured at close quarters as they were when he and Southey years later shared Greta Hall in the Lake country, might have made anyone indignant: a bottle of rum a day helped out by quantities of laudanum was more than a reasonable ration of impulse and imbecility.

On that occasion, as it happened (and as usually happened when he met his antagonists at close quarters), Southey behaved generously. But his exercise of "undeviating simplicity of rectitude" at long distances, in gossip or in print, could inspire just as much indignation as Coleridge's aberrations. He uttered (probably uttered; Mr Sim-

mons is inclined to hurry over the incident) his notorious lie that Byron and Shelley were living in "a league of incest"; he certainly said that Byron was "wicked by disposition" and that his poetry "breathed the spirit of Belial"; and Byron (his indignation flashing still in Mr Simmons's pages) justly retorted:

He had written praises of a regicide;  
 He had written praises of all kings whatever;  
 He had written for republics far and wide,  
 And then against them bitterer than ever;  
 For pantisocracy he once had cried  
 Aloud, a scheme less moral than 'twas clever;  
 Then grew a hearty anti-jacobin—  
 Had turn'd his coat and would have turn'd his skin.

He had sung against all battles, and again  
 In their high praise and glory; he had call'd  
 Reviewing "the ungentle craft," and then  
 Became as base a critic as e'er crawled—  
 Fed, paid and pamper'd by the very men  
 By whom his muse and morals had been maul'd;  
 He had written much blank verse and blanker prose,  
 And more of both than anybody knows.

Because of his tremendous and, on the whole, unsuccessful industry, and because he has never attracted the attention of biographers as have the other great figures of his period, Southey has come down to us as a pale and remote figure. Mr Simmons, surprisingly, asserts that he was a "passionate" man; and that is borne out by the facts.

He was passionately a wowser. And he lived at a time when the great men of letters were passionately the reverse. When he could regard even Tom Moore as "a lump of lasciviousness", what on earth was Southey to make of the spectacle of Byron and his affairs, Coleridge and his laudanum, or Shelley (having departed with Mary Godwin, leaving Harriet to commit suicide) serenely protesting to him, "Merely because I regulated my domestic arrangements without deferring to the notions of the vulgar. . .")? They drove him mad with rage.

As, too, did the political affairs of the day. Even Walter

Scott, who, at a distance, liked him well enough, said he was "nothing better than a wild bull" in his opinions. Carlyle left an unforgettable portrait of him, black with fury:

Before the evening was over Carlyle was unwise enough to ask Southey if he knew De Quincey, whom he had himself met in Edinburgh seven years earlier. It was a tactless question. De Quincy had just been publishing in "Tait's Magazine" his reminiscences of Coleridge; and the revelations they contained of Coleridge's weaknesses, especially in the matter of opium, had given the deepest offence to the poet's relatives and friends, Southey among them. The effect of the question now was violent.

"'Yes, I do know him,' answered Southey, 'and know him to be a great rascal: and if you have opportunity I will thank you to tell him so': his brown-dun face was overspread suddenly almost with black."

The obnoxious subject quickly dropped, but Carlyle's interest was now aroused, and in the subsequent conversation he noted the rapid changes of colour, on Southey's face—the red blush when he was pleased, the "serpent-like flash of *blue* or black blush" when, much more rarely, something annoyed him. His final comment showed deep insight. "I said to myself, 'How has this man contrived, with such a nervous system, to keep alive for near sixty years? Now blushing, under his grey hairs, rosy like a maiden of fifteen; now *slaty*, almost, like a rattlesnake, or fiery serpent? How has he not been torn to pieces long since, under such furious pulling this way and that? He must have somewhere a great deal of methodic virtue in him; I suppose, too, his heart is thoroughly honest, which helps considerably.'"

The fault of Mr Simmons's biography—valuable and interesting though it is—is that, though expressly aware of Southey as a "passionate" man, he depicts, on the whole, chiefly the "methodic virtue". He attempts a praiseworthy balanced study, and, when recording Southey's review of "The Ancient Mariner" as "the clumsiest attempt at German sublimity I ever saw", frankly attributes the error to personal malice; but when noting that nearly all Southey's literary judgments "have been reversed by posterity"—and even when recording his positive discouragement of Charlotte Brontë on the grounds that "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be"—he

submits these as evidence of kindliness of heart. Which, of course, is altogether too innocent. If Southey was not a dunderhead—and Mr Simmons does not think him one—there was something more than kindliness behind the praising of inferior authors and the discouragement of good.

Southey found the writing of poetry so disturbing to his nerves that for many years he abandoned it; and when he did write he took pains to avoid intensity of feeling. His nights were a torment: "I am haunted in dreams more distressingly than can be described." He was indeed a passionate man: but Mr Simmons has not really shown him as such. Perhaps some inescapable dullness in Southey defeated him; yet it seems that, dramatically and imaginatively approached, he could be made a figure as interesting as Hazlitt or Milton; both of whom, in many ways, he resembled.

## A LONG SHORT STORY

ONE of the advantages of Angus and Robertson's *Coast to Coast* anthology is that it joins the *Bulletin* in giving a chance to the writer of the long short story. Cecil Mann reprinted from the *Bulletin* in the first number Gavin Casey's "Short Shift Saturday", Beatrice Davis included a long story in the second, and Vance Palmer has Frank Dalby Davison's "The Road to Yesterday" (from the previous year's Christmas *Bulletin*) in *Coast to Coast* 1944.

The importance of the long story is that it tests out the writer to his full capacity. An inferior writer—even an apparently hopeless one—may fluke a good sketch of a thousand words or so, but nobody can fluke it over a distance of ten or twelve or fifteen thousand words. Characterization, style, construction, dramatization, all the essentials of the short story as an art form are put to the test and no evasion is possible.

As Vance Palmer says in his introduction, "anything" may rank as a short story these days: "a dream, a dialogue, a study of character, a poetic reverie; anything that has a certain unity and the movement of life". But, as Mr Palmer also says, "There cannot be much conflict over stories like de Maupassant's '*Boule de Suif*'." That unchallengeable masterpiece, he continues, "has almost as much material substance as a carved stone; it seems to exist quite independently of its author; you can walk around it and forget about him". And, it might be added, "*Boule de Suif*", like the other stories that make de Maupassant the accepted master of the short story in the world's literature, runs to fifteen thousand words.

"The Road to Yesterday", which would work out at about that length, was better in the slightly shortened version that

appeared in the *Bulletin*. The opening is the trouble. Mr Davison, having the reader at his mercy in a long short story, proposes to describe the scenery; and this he does very nicely, but unscrupulously. However, the gum-trees have some relevance to his theme, and one cannot with a completely easy conscience object to a landscape so feelingly and so exactly observed as this:

The thin soil of the ridges ran to no opulence of leafage, only to grey messmate-trees, with bare gravel and rocky outcrops between, and a few tufts of grey wire-grass. Here was no bird-song, no undergrowth, no ground life. It was a lean, spare bush; life clung to these bony heights only by drawing in on itself; you imagined that the putting forth of a new leaf would be a matter affecting deep issues, and notable in an uneventful calendar.

The story really begins at the seventh page, where the narrator, who has been travelling along a Victorian mountain road to revisit a farm where he had worked years before, comes to the turnoff he has been waiting for and starts talking about his old employer, Arthur Sims. The theme is struck—Sims is a man from Kent, striving to make a living in an Australian wilderness—and Sims's portrait is painted with remarkable clarity:

Mr Sims was a man of medium physique and courageous countenance. Under a bald head fringed with greying curls he had fine blue-grey eyes in a bronzed face, a straight nose, and a good mouth showing between moustache and grizzled beard. Hard work had affected him. His gait was stiff-kneed and he walked with drooping shoulders and dangling hands. He had a habit—perhaps it was the Kentish accent—of drawling and distorting certain vowels. In his mouth "yes" became "yuurce", and "year", "yuur". He had a melodious voice and in his lighter moments would pause in his work to troll a line of a song, most often, "I'll Be a Jolly Pedlar and Around the World I'll Roam".

There is an unforgettable glimpse of the farmer in the nightcap he wears in bed—winking at the youthful narrator's astonishment at the sight. The family circle in the evenings is shown, Mr Sims removing himself from the

noise of snakes-and-ladders to read his only literature—a seedsman's catalogue.

Mr Sims is trying to "recreate on his selection the Kentish garden of his youthful recollections". He is no homesick dreamer, but, farming carefully, patiently and arduously, is a man who "lived in two worlds, that of his present labour and that of his early recollections, and they wove in and out of his thoughts as they worked, each the inspiration of the other". When he ploughs an exceptionally straight furrow it is "crooked as a dog's hind leg" by comparison with the wonderful furrows they used to plough in Kent. And so the narrator comes to regard Kent as "a sort of fabled country, something to look back on much as the people of the Dark Ages must have looked back on the fabled days of the Roman order".

Harry, Mr Sims's son, does not share this reverence. He prefers Australian methods of pruning to Kentish, and once he even derides a "dear old English gentleman" his father has been approving.

The story, it becomes apparent, might have been entitled "The Making of an Australian", for Australia is "Home" to the sons, and even the father, reluctantly, admits that he left Kent—the land of serfdom to the squire—for a country where a man could farm his own land and be his own master. But the character is too faithfully observed for any sudden "conversion" to Australianism on the father's part. He has a bitter struggle with his land and in a memorable scene, when a great hailstorm wrecks his crops, curses the alien skies that have inflicted on him what seems like ruin:

It was a wonderful hailstorm; the iron roof roared under it. You couldn't see fifty yards from the veranda. The ground whitened with hail while you watched. We stood admiring the transformation, pointing out the big fellows—like pigeons' eggs—and exclaiming over the way the hail danced back from the veranda ledge. We hadn't thought of it knocking every blossom from the raspberry-canec.

Just then we saw Mr Sims coming in towards the house from down by the lower cultivation. He wasn't running. Indifferent to the pelting hail, he was walking more heavily than usual, and his shoulders



were more drooped. We remembered the raspberry-canes then. Our voices were hushed and our eyes fixed on him.

Within a few yards of the veranda he stopped and lifted a haggard face and a clenched fist to the sky, and shouted, "Send it down! Send it down!"

Continued despondency, Frank Davison says shrewdly, was possibly "a luxury beyond Mr Sims's means". And also there is something indomitable in the man. Farming, perhaps, in his inexperience of Australian conditions, in the wrong type of country and with methods sometimes unsuitable, he persists and, in a measure, succeeds. He will never join his son Harry in frankly jeering at Kent; he never masters Australian conditions as his son will; but he grows a superb crop of apples—and forgets to say that Kentish apples were better. Until old age defeats him, "he succeeded in making a living from the selection".

In a tradition established chiefly by Henry Lawson (who, in his dark moods, hated the Australian earth) a good many contemporary Australian writers would have finished this story with the picture of the abandoned selection: an image of defeat. But Frank Davison, hearteningly and more truthfully, goes on to record the family history: "Charlie and Annie were still in the district, along the new road, in the red-soil potato-growing country further back in the hills." It is this that gives the story its epical quality: the sons of the man of Kent have become Australians; as resolute as the father, feeling for the new country what he felt for the old; at home.

This is an old theme in Australian writing—the remoulding of the pioneer; a basic, a fundamental theme, here presented with a rare fidelity. It does not—cannot—seem stale, because the character is fresh and vigorous.

Frank Davison has done something more than paint a vital portrait of Mr Sims. "The Road to Yesterday" is a story that moves unerringly on three planes of significance: Mr Sims is at once himself as an individual; an Australian national symbol of almost legendary status; and finally ("In my thoughts he had come in a way to stand for all humanity,

holding to its dream while heart and nerve endure") an image of all mankind, steadfast against the malice of the gods. He is a Conradian figure, comparable in his simplicity and his staunchness to Captain McWhirr of *Typhoon* or Singleton of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

If the story falls short of the Conradian heights—as a hailstorm is less than a typhoon—and if it lacks something of de Maupassant's high spirits, it is still, in its quieter way, a minor triumph of craftsmanship. Printed separately (and perhaps decorated with woodcuts) it would make a book that would last: a work less immediately appealing but sounder and more mature than *Man-Shy*.

This story is outstanding in *Coast to Coast 1944*, not simply because of its length but because it is an unforgettable portrait of an individual. And although it is true that any bit of writing may be interesting—may even rank as a good short story—in the long run it is always the creation of memorable character that makes a writer's name. Next to Frank Davison, the writers in this issue of the anthology who are primarily concerned with characterization, and whose portrayals remain the most vividly in the mind, are Margaret Trist ("What Else is There?" is probably the best story she has yet written) and Brian James. Gavin Casey, Marjorie Barnard and E. O. Schlunke are well represented.

Of most of the other stories it might be said (with the inevitable half-truth of a generalization) that their appeal is not so much literary as sociological, historical or geographical. That is, the authors are less concerned with the idiosyncracies of character than with recording mass states of mind, or notable scenes and events—usually of the war. There are also one or two stories chiefly of experimental value.

## AUSTRALIAN POETRY 1944

THE show-piece of *Australian Poetry 1944* (edited by R. G. Howarth) is Robert FitzGerald's "Heemskerck Shoals". Lyrics by Judith Wright and Rosemary Dobson—necessarily slighter than FitzGerald's venture into the dramatic monologue of Browning—are also outstanding.

A possible fault in the selection is that the war poems by Kenneth Slessor, Eric Irvin and Shawn O'Leary are made to essentially the same pattern, each working up to a "shock" image of death in the last line. The repetition of the pathos theme in the anthology is not, however, a criticism of the poems in themselves. Irvin's and O'Leary's are both good; Slessor's technically captivating in its use of a musical internal half-rhyme:

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs  
The convoys of dead sailors come;  
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,  
But morning rolls them in the foam.

FitzGerald has something more than war's pathos to convey:

. . . Though that  
was what the thought in his mind was biting at:  
the necessity in men, deep down, close cramped,  
not seen in their own hearts, for some attempt  
at being more than ordinary men,  
rising above themselves. It was an urge  
that swung from wars to follies, being the purge  
of stagnation from the veins, and violent when  
there was little to work it off against; but was  
man's only greatness also.

Thrust into tragedy, the soldier poet sees—or, at any rate, writes about—only the tragedy; FitzGerald has looked deep

into the soul of man for the cause of war and sees that it is one form—though the most regrettable—of “man’s only greatness”. Also, when not altogether convincingly he credits Abel Janzoon Tasman with the authorship of the White Australia policy, he perceives that war may be necessary:

. . . There was one place—  
only the south was left—where spread clear floors  
for feet of the European. He’d have it the test  
of southern citizenship how much the need  
to preserve it so by battle and vigilant doors  
was sacred in men’s bone, immutable creed.

FitzGerald is, as he says of Tasman, “a practical man”. To turn for contrast to a less practical kind of poetry, here is Rosemary Dobson walking up to a gate on a fine morning in the country and finding someone leaning on it—an “affable stranger” who turns out to be Morning himself:

Who went before through the gate—this affable stranger  
Who touches the topmost rail and leans to dazzle,  
Spinning his hat for greeting? Morning,  
Golden and rakish, who stole his shirt from the scarecrow  
To shroud the fire at heart. Good Morning,  
Swing back the gate, good fellow.  
Swing back the gate! There is nobody there. The sunlight  
In golden footprints runs up the ridge of the hill.

There’s more than a little of W. H. Davies in that poem; not in technique, but in feeling. It’s a song to make glad the heart. FitzGerald’s poem, far more important though it is, could do with some of its warmth and colour and life. Norman Lindsay said in the *Bulletin*, while paying tribute to its strength, that “Heemskerck Shoals” lacked the “half-dozen lines of description that would bring the sea, the ship and Tasman fully to life”, and that was an exact criticism. FitzGerald is the accepted leader in Australian poetry today, and “Heemskerck Shoals” is a significant step in his development. By it, with some evident hesitation, he advances from the comparative remoteness and staticism of philosophical poetry to the arena of life and action—Shake-

speare's world and Browning's; the creation of character, its revelation and dramatization in event. He takes Abel Tasman at a moment of supreme crisis, when his ship is nearly wrecked on a reef off Fiji, and in the flash of that moment, "all in the span of a breath and gone in a breath", sums up the man and his life; a plain man with a deep excitement in him, a practical man masking a dreamer; one who has learnt by hard experience that

you must keep your face indifferent, lest  
you betray the excitement of gold.

When a poet writes about men and their behaviour he enters into competition with the novelist and the short-story writer, and here there are certain elementary rules he must observe. "Make see!" said Conrad; and again, "Wring the last ounce out of your subject." FitzGerald's quiet style is deceptive; he has done more to make the reader "see" this near-shipwreck than may be apparent at a first reading. If all his descriptions of the sea, widely separated in the poem, are brought together one finds:

. . . a pack  
of snarling reefs and jagged islands . . .

. . . the sea's rankest mood  
in the emptiness of the forties . . .

. . . You could not hide in a bag  
thousands of miles of trafficable seas. . . .

. . . a day's advance  
through blue uncertainty, a desperate chance—  
like that these minutes back, which taught the feel  
of coral running inches under the keel. . . .

collect opinions on the apparent shrinking  
of twenty degrees of Pacific toss and fall. . . .

. . . It was well  
a council hadn't been needed when disaster  
boiled all about them—a committee on sinking  
the vertical course to coral.

And there is personality also in the poem. Not a single glimpse of Tasman's features, it is true; only outlines of the crew's faces and the faces of the board of the East India Company back in Batavia; but at least those outlines—the sailors have "death's cast for faces"; and

. . . What one could guess,  
however, was faces round the boardroom table  
growing graver and longer as the report showed less  
and chiller prospect of profit.

FitzGerald's restraint is almost a kind of arrogance—that honest and justifiable pride of the artist who knows he is master of his craft. "Describe a shipwreck?" he says, "I can do it for you in a line—'coral running inches under the keel'; what more do you want?" And really, when one has read the poem closely, one wants very little more.

But that little is important; more ship, more water, a handful of whiskers. Tasman is not as much *present* in this poem as is the fantastic figure of Morning in Rosemary Dobson's poem; the appearance of the sea is not shown as clearly as the campfire in Judith Wright's lyric ("Bullocky"), the sound of waves is certainly not heard as are her exquisite cattlebells:

While past the campfire's crimson ring  
the star-struck darkness cupped him round,  
and centuries of cattlebells  
rang with their sweet uneasy sound.

Restraint has its virtues, admittedly; but—too much restraint, and you have no poem at all: make your face too "indifferent" and it's blank. FitzGerald undoubtedly has a poem, and a good one—

. . . You could not hide in a bag  
thousands of miles of trafficable seas—

but it cannot be taken fully as a re-creation of Tasman and his near-shipwreck, but rather as a commentary on them. As such, it is masterly. It has the dignity and spaciousness

of major poetry. If the thought is difficult to follow in a casual reading that is only because we are accustomed to a certain woolliness of expression in poetry and FitzGerald writes with the utmost clarity and precision; and if anyone finds the thought difficult to swallow, that is also because we are more used to soft-thinking than to hard.

A discussion of all the contributions to *Australian Poetry 1944* would lead, of course, to the inevitable minor complaints about omissions and inclusions. But the quality on the whole is high, and Mr Howarth has obviously given fair consideration to all schools of poetic thought. Underlying the mass of the verses one feels a vigorous stirring of national life; which leaves the impression (only to be verified, of course, by comparing the various numbers poem by poem) that this is the best issue of the anthology yet published.

## AN EXPLORATION OF DECADENCE

THE private lives of writers and artists are public property. The secrets of the ordinary man are buried with him. And so, when one is reading how the poet James Thomson, for instance, drank himself to death, it is only fair to keep in mind the thousands of mute and inglorious Thomsons, in no way connected with the arts, who have brought themselves to a similar doom.

Were the lives of greengrocers or butchers scrutinized down the ages as ruthlessly as are those of artists, were their bankruptcies, suicides, lunacies, moral aberrations, addictions to drink or drugs recorded as remorselessly, one might easily conclude that these on the whole estimable tradesmen were monsters among men. True, it is seldom one hears of a butcher's taking to opium; but it is also true that one seldom hears anything about butchers.

The warning is a necessary prelude to an examination of William Gaunt's *The Æsthetic Adventure* for, dealing with art and letters in France and England from 1880 to 1910—the "doomed generation" of the nineties—the book reads less like an excursion into the heaven of the arts than a descent into hell.

It should also be borne in mind that Mr Gaunt is interested specifically in the self-styled "Decadents" and that such sane, robust and splendid figures as Browning do not come into the present volume. Yeats, who kept his head among the lunacies of the latter end of the period, makes only a momentary appearance.

And yet, when the qualifications have been made and the exceptions listed, and after it has been admitted that in any period there are weak or degraded men in the community of art, the era of *The Æsthetic Adventure* remains



startling, sinister and appalling. Speaking of Rimbaud and Verlaine, Mr Gaunt says:

What strange compulsion was it that caused a clerk of twenty-seven and a youth of sixteen to join together in a series of frantic escapades which caused the elder to wallow in the gutter, and to continue throughout his life to hold a balance of poetry and debauch? Was it simply an accident of personality?

Against that there is some circumstantial evidence. There were too many like cases happening within the same period to be put down to accident. The mood first signalized by Baudelaire, with his deliberate cultivation of vice, was following its appointed course.

"There were too many like cases" for the spectacle of decadence to be put down to accident. "Like cases" there certainly were. Mr Gaunt's list begins with the drunkard Edgar Allan Poe whose influence on Baudelaire is, of course, notorious. An oddity of history, surely, that an American should have set the pattern for that "European state of mind" which is undergoing its dying agony in Australia at this day.

What caused the phenomenon of decadence, so clearly, even truculently manifested by Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du Mal*? Mr Gaunt has an answer, and an impressive one:

A long and exhausting war was over. The bloody tide of conquest had flowed across Europe, ebbed and left behind the stagnant flats of anti-climax. A ruined dictator had died, of cancer in the stomach, in the little island to which he had been exiled, far out in the Atlantic. A sick continent, shivering in the rags of ancient finery, amid the remnants of destroyed institutions, looked with gloomy surmise on the future.

This was the state of affairs when the Napoleonic campaigns were ended, and the Emperor, with dramatic finality, had disappeared from the scene. The following stages of mental reaction were spread over many years. First came a mood of depression, which affected many countries but was most strongly marked in France. The cause of that depression was to a large extent physical. France had been bled white, by the wholesale slaughter accompanying those two events of historical brilliance, the Revolution and the First Empire. When the Terror had killed off the aristocracy and Napoleon had continued the work of the guillotine by squandering in battle a very large number of young and vigorous lives, the cream of the nation

was twice skimmed. The unfit and the disillusioned remained, together with a middle-class, a *bourgeoisie*, staid, prudent, small-minded, tight-fisted, of traders and peasants who had profited by the catastrophes of the evolutionary process and become the backbone of society.

Fifteen years after the battle of Waterloo, among those who were intelligent enough to feel an emotion, despair was widespread. The splendid era which war seemed to promise while it was still in progress had not matured. The idealist found himself in a world from which ideals were conspicuously absent. The republican, after all his trouble, was mortified by the spectacle of a restored monarchy whose unreal forms and spurious titles parodied the Old Régime; and as the heads of those who would have been his patrons were cut off, the man of genius received neither sympathy nor support in this grim, post-war existence.

The names of those who did away with themselves or sank into an early grave, in or about the year 1830, make a distinguished list. Those who did not commit suicide or give up all hope became defiant. If an idealistic revolution had come to a dull end it was still possible to express contempt for dullness and to flout the society in which it was enshrined. The ardent spirits of 1830 thus became romantic outlaws and outlawry in due course a fashion. The intellectuals of Paris wore the steeple-crowned hats and sinister cloaks of Italian brigands and cultivated disdain for the law-abiding citizen.

Despair or an hysterical defiance—these, it appeared, were the only possible attitude. Possible for whom? For weak souls and minor artists. Mr Gaunt is engaged on a three-volume survey of the “modern” movement in the arts, and may have something to say on this point later. A trifle too jocularly detached in this second of his series, he states clearly enough his opinion on the essential littleness of the men he is studying, but he might well have dwelt longer on the point.

For Baudelaire, after all, was a silly fellow. “Satanism” was a silly creed. And Baudelaire’s poetry, though technically accomplished, never had any pretensions to the stature of greatness. His warmest admirer could hardly submit him as the equal of a Homer or a Shakespeare. A silly fellow, and a little fellow, dreaming of little sins; for when the great and mysterious, most deadly and monstrous vices were at last coldly examined in a law court at the trial of

Oscar Wilde, the details were as petty as they were squalid. Satan would hardly have been interested. It was a shallow cesspool in which the "doomed generation" drowned itself: Yeats walked through it unsullied.

A cesspool shallow but evil; a menace to the weak and a temptation to the corrupt. Baudelaire, says Mr Gaunt, was "the complete expression and final result of thirty decaying years"; and it is certain that the cult of Satanism did nothing to check the decay of France. In so far as any one man can be, Baudelaire is, as Mr Gaunt recognizes, the nigger in the contemporary woodpile.

Mr Gaunt deals very interestingly with the relationship between Satanism and the cult of art for art's sake, which was the banner under which marched most of the English painters and writers who began to imitate the French in the eighties and nineties. A creed harmless in itself, art for art's sake; closer to the real purpose of the arts than the Leftist heresy of art for politics (which caused Karl Marx—Mr Gaunt recalls—to place men of letters "somewhere between porters and organ-grinders" in a list of undesirable citizens). A simple, delicate, remote, fastidious creed, favoured usually by simple, delicate, remote fastidious souls such as Walter Pater; and leading, when not corrupted, only to something as pretty and as petty as the worship of Japanese prints and ginger jars inaugurated by the æsthete Whistler and the go-getter Howell:

In these works what appeared to the Westerner as an almost uncanny delicacy, as strange and detached from everyday life as if they had dropped from the moon, was a confirmation, to the men of the Second Empire, of their theories and longings. Here was an example of that difficult refinement, that aristocratic aloofness in art which Baudelaire had sought. Here surely was art for art's sake, living intensely in and for itself exactly as Gautier had imagined it in his poetic enamels and cameos. There was no subject, or at least no subject you could understand or need bother about (which came to much the same thing). There was no vulgar imitation of nature (how vulgar by comparison appeared the oil painting of the salon). But on the contrary a fastidious, deliberate selection of line, shape and colour, made, beyond question, with the purpose of imparting

a pure æsthetic satisfaction. The black-haired dolls, posed inactive and expressionless in empty box-like rooms, meant as little in themselves, had the same remoteness as the models whose dumb beauty ornamented the rooms in which Gautier and Baudelaire conversed. The wisdom of the Far East had been conveyed across the sea at the most opportune moment possible.

"Inactive . . . empty . . . dumb." Something more than this vacuous delicacy was required to satisfy the Japanese soul, as we have seen in recent years. And something more than mere æstheticism was demanded by the æsthetes of France and England; if not the frenzy of barbarism and cruelty that was to break out in the unbalanced east, then at least a yearning towards it; a hunger for reality that took the insane form—these were weak, corrupt and little men—of the deliberate pursuit of what they admitted to be evil:

In this egoistic vision of ideal beauty there lurked a poison—the same poison as in the poems of Baudelaire, from the study of whom Pater may have imbibed it direct. It was the sense that something vaguely evil was to be found at the very centre of beauty, an evil not to be avoided but to be embraced and enjoyed (intellectually and imaginatively) by the writer. An excitement was given to the quest for the perfection of the gods by the idea that it held some corrupt and diabolic secret.

And nature very quickly began to imitate art. Painting and poetry were to search for some "core of evil"; and poets and painters, because their art was, after all, an expression of their personalities, began to practise such evil as they were capable of. Baudelaire sought his ideal in opium and his negress; Verlaine, Rimbaud, Wilde and the painter Simeon Solomons in perversion; Swinburne in brandy; Francis Thompson in opium; James Thomson in drink; Dowson in drink; the dwarf Toulouse-Lautrec lived his bizarre, nightmare life in the brothels of Paris.

Mr Gaunt carries his pursuit of decadence as far as the "sick-room" world of the novels of Proust. Doubtless in his next volume he will have to consider, among others, Modigliani.

They were in a sense "martyrs", these men of the doomed

generation, Mr Gaunt maintains. With the old aristocratic order gone, the new civilization of the bourgeoisie in France and England was sunk in a deadly respectability. Rejected, despised, the artist flung at the face of prudery the challenge of Satanism. He sacrificed himself, so that the arts might be freed and the public shocked to awareness. The theory has doubtless its modicum of truth, and the public that rejected the arts may have been quite as reprehensible as the artists who practised their "sins seventy times seven"—as Swinburne, rather optimistically, put it. But the "martyrdom" did the arts—in its immediate effects, at any rate—more harm than good:

If the trial be considered, apart from all personal matters, as an æsthetic issue, it would seem that he [Wilde] had failed miserably. As a result of it the public was convinced that Wilde's books were immoral; that if he was a genius he was an evil genius. They were confirmed in their belief that a book should inculcate moral sentiments and that the best authors were the most respectable.

The movement had the opposite results from what, interpreting it in the most favourable light, it intended. Art for art's sake (still being practised in poetry and painting) did nothing to reconcile the artist to society but rather, in its latest phase of deliberate obscurity, widened the gulf. The pursuit of evil, usually disguised these days as "the psycho-analytical approach" in paint or words, has only confirmed the wowser in his belief that all freed art (properly a refreshment of the human spirit) is a menace to national welfare. The æsthetes did not serve the cause of art; they betrayed it. They did not infuse into human existence something gay and gallant, as had Burns and Byron, but something corrupt, squalid and miserable. A strong man can make debauch an adventure; with the æsthetes—this was their real sin against life—it was a surrender. They were, in a word, effeminate.

Mr Gaunt does not openly come to quite so definite a conclusion. After an interesting discussion of the emergence of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin (none of whom he worships) as latter-day rebels—surly and solitary fellows, a

natural development from the æsthetes' pose of defiance—he sums up: "In some respects it is not a very edifying story. . . . There was in total result a grain of beauty, impossible to weigh and estimate against the insignificant expenditure of lives."

It is interesting to see such a survey as this being written; and having the virtues as well as the defects of an academic approach, *The Æsthetic Adventure* is an exceptionally good one: comprehensive, knowledgeable, witty. When surveys are written a period is ended.

## DIDO AND ACHILLES

IN the name of Dido there is a fine and tragic ring, the echo of "old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago".

Dido, Queen of Carthage. Even if one has forgotten precisely who she was and what she did or suffered the name retains its magic. Somebody must have put her in a poem, for to speak of her brings to the mind the image of a weeping willow.

In such a night  
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand  
Upon the wild sea-banks, and waft her love  
To come again to Carthage.

It is probably Shakespeare who has kept the lady alive for us, and, in their setting in *The Merchant of Venice* and in the mood of that setting, those are some of the loveliest lines in all English poetry. But we are a barbarous generation and do not read the ancients. Dido, as T. S. Eliot's *What is a Classic?* reminds us, is Virgil's creation; Virgil's property; an Immortal gift to the world from a Roman poet who died at Brindisi nineteen years before the birth of Christ.

It would be absurd to claim her for Shakespeare, for against those four lines of English poetry must be set the whole of the fourth book of the *Æneid*—one of the supreme achievements of Latin poetry—in which is told the full story of the queen's love for Æneas (how he came to her as a suppliant after the fall of Troy, how she cherished him, how he deserted her and went away to fight Turnus and found the Roman Empire, and how she stabbed herself on a funeral pyre and died with the cry of "Thus, thus it is good to pass into the dark. Let the pitiless Dardanian's gaze drink in this fire out at sea, and my death be the omen he carries

on his way"); and to this must be added the scene in the sixth book when Æneas, venturing alive into the gloomy country of the dead, makes his futile excuses to her indignant shade:

Among whom Dido the Phœnician, fresh from her death-wound, wandered into the vast forest; by her the Trojan hero stood, and knew the dim form through the darkness, even as the moon at the month's beginning to him who sees or thinks he sees her rising through the vapours; he let tears fall, and spoke to her lovingly and sweet:

"Alas, Dido! so the news was true that reached me; thou didst perish, and the sword sealed thy doom! Ah me, was I the cause of thy death? By the stars I swear, by the heavenly powers and all that is sacred beneath the earth, unwillingly, O queen, I left thy shore. But the gods' commands, which now compel me to pass through this shadowy place, this land of ragged overgrowth and deep night, drove me imperiously forth; nor could I deem my departure would bring thee pain so great. Stay thy footstep, and withdraw not from our gaze. From whom fliest thou?"

In such words and with starting tears Æneas soothed the burning and fierce-eyed spirit. She turned away with looks fixed fast on the ground, stirred no more in countenance by the speech he essays than if she stood in iron flint or Marpesian stone. At length she started, and fled wrathfully into the shadowy woodland where Sychæus, in responsive passion and equal love, is her husband as long ago. Yet Æneas, dismayed by her cruel doom, follows her far on her way with pitying tears.

Thence he pursues his appointed path.

This is, of course, truly great poetry. Even in the prose translation, foregoing altogether that consummate felicity of expression for which Virgil is usually most acclaimed, its pathos moves the heart. The whole episode is, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, a "great human action": and, since it can thus emerge almost undimmed through all the disabilities of translation, it attests the truth of Arnold's contention that the action or the passion of poetry is of the primary importance. And, in fact, it was to this very episode that Arnold turned when he sought in Virgil an example of that passionate excellence he found also in the *Iliad* and the *Oresteia*. Mr Eliot likewise turns to Dido:



I have always thought the meeting of Æneas with the shade of Dido, in Book VI, not only one of the most poignant but one of the most civilized passages in poetry. It is complex in meaning and economical in expression, for it not only tells us about the attitude of Dido—what is still more important is that it tells us about the attitude of Æneas. Dido's behaviour appears almost as a projection of Æneas's own conscience: this, we feel, is the way in which Æneas's conscience would expect Dido to behave to him. The point, it seems to me, is not that Dido is unforgiving—though it is important that, instead of railing at him, she merely snubs him—perhaps the most telling snub in all poetry: what matters most is, that Æneas does not forgive himself—and this, significantly, in spite of the fact of which he is well aware, that all he has done has been in compliance with destiny.

Mr Eliot is here over-generous to the Roman poet. The incident tells us a good deal about the character of Dido, who, as a woman scorned, becomes a figure more pathetic, if less furiously impassioned, than the great Medea of Euripides: and who is, consequently, the most memorable creation in the *Æneid*. And, just for a moment, Æneas also begins to become interesting as a human being. But merely to state that is to ignore the fact that, in the poem as a whole, the portrait of Æneas is vague, shadowy and inconsistent; he is not a character "in the round" but the mere puppet of a pseudo-historical epic. Commenting on the scene in Book IV when Æneas deserts Dido, Mr F. J. H. Letters, lecturer in classics at New England University College, New South Wales, remarked in his excellently balanced *Virgil*, published a year or so ago: "If the unrighteous piety of his reply arouses in us the same scorn as in Dido, it is only fair to remember that here, as so often henceforward, he is hardly more than an abstraction, a symbol of the Empire."

Moreover, while considering what the Dido incident is—a moving portrait of a woman deserted by her lover, marred by the fact that the lover is an "abstraction"—it is important also to consider what it is not. In the first place, it is not original.

Mr Letters itemizes a great many of the Roman's borrow-

ings. Mr Eliot clears this awkward fence with one prodigious bound, recording simply—with approval—that the maker of the epic was “rewriting” the poetry of his Greek and Roman predecessors. But it would surely be more exact to say that, by and large, Virgil was simply an imitator of Homer. It is true that Virgil celebrated the idea of imperial Rome; but—the Greeks had the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the Romans must have the *Æneid*. Odysseus had deserted Circe and Calypso; Æneas must desert Dido. Odysseus had journeyed down to Hades; then Æneas must go there also.

Both Circe and Calypso having received the news of the impending departure of Odysseus with divine tranquillity, Virgil has undoubtedly improved on Homer in the present instance. His version is more human, more moving, dramatically more exciting. But it can hardly be denied that in the epic as a whole we are aware at every turn of the mighty ghost of Homer. And seldom does Virgil improve on him. Dido still misleads the voyager.

The second great fault that must be found with the Dido story—beautiful as it is in itself—is that it does not *belong*. It is an incident, an interlude, an episode; something by the way.

It is true, of course, that the affair with Dido delays Æneas on the travels that will lead him to Italy; true again that when he meets that pitiful shadow in Hades he is on his way to an extremely improbable interview with some Roman heroes. And so Mr Letters is justified when he speaks of the “formal oneness” of the poem. But this is a mere political unity, as it were, not the organic unity of a living work of art. There is no steady development in the character of Æneas, mounting to some great crisis. It is not even possible to feel that he is really driven by any passion to rush about the world and found the Roman Empire. He is a drifting dummy, following in the wake of Odysseus, who *happens* to call on Dido because Odysseus had called on Circe and Calypso: but the wanderings of Homer’s hero are held in an organic unity by the drama of Penelope and her suitors which underlies the whole. All the time we are

listening to Odysseus boasting about his travels to such ladies as he meets on the way, we are wondering whether or not he will get home in time to save his wife and his lands. Homer, in a word, knew the importance of suspense. There is no human, no dramatic suspense in Virgil's poem as a whole.

The suspense of the *Odyssey* does not quite "work"; for Odysseus takes a long time telling the ladies about Odysseus. But the beautiful structure is there, all the same. And so, too, is the *Iliad* beautifully constructed.

More than anything else in Homer—except his characterization—one admires his sense of form; that, with the whole confusion and turmoil of the Trojan war before him, tempting him into the mere chronicling of events, he should have pruned and selected, shaped and moulded until the great mass was compressed into the simple triangle-story of Agamemnon, Achilles and Briseis of the fair cheeks. No doubt he interspersed too much of the history of the war; but it should never be forgotten that he told it within the framework of a human drama—"Only from me of all the Achaians took he my darling lady and keepeth her—let him sleep beside her and take his joy! But why must the Argives make war on the Trojans?"

And against the vapidity of Æneas, how resolute, how firm and clear and strong are the characters of the *Iliad*!

Then Achilles fleet of foot looked at him scowling and said: "Ah me, thou clothed in shamelessness, thou of crafty mind, how shall any Achaian hearken to thy bidding with all his heart, be it to go on a journey or to fight the foe amain? Not by reason of the Trojan spearmen came I hither to fight, for they have not wronged me . . . but thee, thou shameless one, followed we hither to make thee glad, by earning recompense at the Trojans' hands for Menelaos and for thee, thou dog-face!"

Then Agamemnon king of men made answer to him: "Go home with thy ships and company and lord it among thy Myrmidons; I reckon not aught of thee nor care I for thy indignation; and this shall be my threat to thee: seeing Phœbus Apollo bereaveth me of Chryseis, her with my ship and my company will I send back; and mine own self will I go to thy hut and take Briseis of the fair cheeks, even

that thy meed of honour, that thou mayest well know how far greater I am than thou, and so shall another hereafter abhor to match his words with mine and rival me to my face."

These are not "abstractions" talking, but men.

And what is it, essentially, that Homer is offering us? More, certainly, than an exciting interlude in a political chronicle, for the whole of the *Iliad* is built around this quarrel. But merely, then, a trivial squabble between two warlords for the possession of a slave-girl?

To think that would be completely to misapprehend the profundity of Homer's mind. For the loss of Briseis, the poem subsequently makes clear, is only the excuse Achilles seizes upon to escape his destiny, just as the death of Patroklos is only the excuse he will seize upon when later he decides to face his doom like a man and a hero. The whole of the *Iliad* revolves upon the question, will Achilles join in battle again or will he not?; and the fatal question that he must answer in his own soul is most clearly stated:

For thus my goddess mother telleth me, Thetis the silver-footed, that twain fates are bearing me to the issue of death. If I abide here and besiege the Trojans' city, then my returning home is taken from me, but my fame shall be imperishable; but if I go home to my dear native land, my high fame is taken from me, but my life shall endure long while, neither shall the issue of death soon reach me.

Shall I escape, or shall I fight? Shall I die with honour or live without it? What is best for a man—riches or a high fame, comfort or a great endeavour? That is what the *Iliad* is about. That is the human problem it sets, discusses and answers; and, today as it was when Troy was besieged, and as it will be while the race of man walks the earth, it is the fundamental human problem: it's a harsh and unjust world—how are we going to face it?

If, then, a comparison is made between the art of Virgil as a whole and the art of Homer—and this is to exclude the tremendous development of Greek literature by the dramatists of the Golden Age—one must find the Roman epic inferior in form, drama, characterization, passion; un-

inspired in conception—it was written to the order of Augustus; imitative in execution; its virtues those of serious-mindedness rather than profundity, sonority rather than vitality . . . the work of a great talent that, like Milton's, never found its proper direction. When Mr Eliot asserts—

In Homer, the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans is hardly larger in scope than a feud between one Greek city-State and a coalition of other city-States: behind the story of Æneas is the consciousness of a more radical distinction, a distinction which is at the same time a statement of *relatedness* between the two great cultures and, finally, of their reconciliation under an all-embracing destiny—

he proves, as is not difficult to do, that Virgil wrote a better political epic than Homer, but he ignores—for the purposes of his essay—the fact that Homer did not try to write anything of the sort, the *Iliad* being primarily a drama of the human passions.

And when these considerations are borne in mind, it is difficult, in spite of his masterly analysis of the development of culture within a nation, to accept Mr Eliot's final contention that Virgil is "our classic, the classic of all Europe".

Whether or not one can do so depends, of course, entirely on the definition of "classic". Mr Eliot, who argues with a fine lucidity and with many brilliant asides, does not assert that Virgil was "the greatest poet who ever wrote" nor even, necessarily—he is not specific on the point—that he was greater than Homer. "I want to define one kind of art, and I am not concerned that it is absolutely and in every respect *better* or *worse* than another kind."

Associating with his particular meaning of "classic" chiefly the idea of "maturity"—"maturity of mind, maturity of manners, maturity of language and perfection of the common style"—Mr Eliot believes that for our standard of the classic "we owe more to Virgil than to any other one poet"; and he declares:

To preserve the classical standard and to measure every other individual work of literature by it is to see that, while our literature

as a whole may contain everything, every single work in it may be defective in something. . . . Without the constant application of the classical measure . . . we tend to become provincial. . . . What common measure of excellence have we in literature, among our several languages, which is not the classical measure? . . . It is sufficient that this standard should have been established once for all: the task does not have to be done again.

The flaw in *What Is a Classic?* is Mr Eliot's refusal to define his term "maturity". That there must be a "classical criterion", by which all works of literature—even those of Shakespeare—are to be judged less or more defective, no one could deny. The classic standard, as Mr Eliot points out, will be distinguished by maturity of mind, manners, language and style; and, since he exploited to the full (or nearly so) the resources of the Roman language at a time when the Roman culture was at its most mature, Virgil is, in a unique sense, a classic. But, before we can accept that "we owe more to Virgil than to any other one poet" for a comprehensive measure of the classic, we would have to agree that the Roman's borrowings from Homer attest his maturity of mind; whereas, to the present writer, they suggest—in Mr Eliot's own sense of the term—a provinciality. Roman poetry, to use another of Mr Eliot's terms, was born "exhausted"; and only in the prose fiction of Petronius did Roman letters really escape from the gigantic shadow of the Greeks.

Where shall we turn, then, if Virgil does not fulfil Mr Eliot's own requirements, for our standard of the classic? The truly supreme classic is not a human but an imagined being: a Platonic Idea. And the nearest one can come to the realization of that mythical Ideal Poet is in the *total* of Greek literature, or the total achievement of Shakespeare.

## SALT WATER MEN

THE jangling of an automatic fire-alarm, just at the moment when one has opened Monsieur Marin-Marie's *Wind Aloft, Wind Alow* at a chapter entitled "Heavy Weather", reminds one a little too forcibly that Sydney in February is an outer suburb of the sun. Perhaps the building is not on fire—the machine has merely, like a cicada, burst spontaneously into its abominable song—but the city is quite hot enough to bring to mind that ominous story of Marjorie Barnard's in the first *Coast to Coast* in which she imagined the whole continent drying and withering and the last surviving inhabitants stumbling to the sea for comfort.

M. Marin-Marie serves a noble purpose on a day so intolerable. You can climb into the little boat in which, single-handed, he crossed the Atlantic, and cool yourself in great waters:

From the crests you see an ocean of foam; from time to time the top of a huge wave topples over and bursts into an unforgettable cloud of spray, shot with pink in the early light. Facing the wind it is difficult to open your eyes.

Still more striking are the extraordinary patches of indescribable green, "electric green" as I always call it, which appear on the slopes of the larger waves, those which break or at least try to break, before they are decapitated by the fury of the wind. This is an "effect" which marine painters find it almost impossible to reproduce, as it is essentially luminous; not that there are many who have really seen it.

Some of Marin-Marie's own water-colours are reproduced in black-and-white in this autobiography, and it is amusing to learn that, after all the excitement about "modernism" in French art, this official painter to the French Ministry of Marine is almost "academic" in his accuracy—the sea looks

like the sea in them, and ships look like ships. Marin-Marie is one painter, at any rate, who has really seen his subject-matter. In fact, in his little boat, he has skied on it:

Normally in this sort of weather a small boat can make no headway. She usually lies with the wind on the beam, and when I speak of "slide" I mean she first climbs sideways towards the crest, where more often than not she gets nearly knocked down; then comes a dizzy drop down the far slope, still sideways. I have seen slides of this kind which literally resembled a downward rush on skis, powdered snow, tracks and all; only instead of a man's weight what is slithering down is a displacement of ten or twenty tons, and I can assure you the effect is impressive.

When there is so much pleasure to be drawn merely from the contemplation of such large quantities of salt water, it is good to discover in "Standby's" *Little Known of These Waters* that Australian writing can be quite as satisfyingly damp as French. Like Marin-Marie, "Standby" has "really seen" what he is writing about:

It was a day to gladden the heart of any sailor. The vivid blue sea, its surface scarcely ruffled by the light easterly breeze, sparkled merrily in the warm morning sunlight. At the *Sung Tong's* foremast the signal flags, flapping lazily round their halyards, stood out in bright contrast to the cloudless sky. Higher up a flock of snowy-breasted gulls dived and wheeled in a noisy effort to dislodge one of their party from his position of vantage on the mast truck. The noise of their quarrelling seemed only to emphasise the peace of the morning. On the fo'castle head the old bosun swung the lead and lifted up his voice to the bridge in a monotonous "Six 'n' a 'arf. Still six 'n' a 'arf." Standing close by him the mate was sipping a large mug of tea and keeping one eye on the lead line and one on the approaching pilot launch.

One is aboard the *Sung Tong* with "Standby", just as one is aboard the *Winnibelle* with Marin-Marie. There are other occasions in *Little Known of These Waters* when one is, as it were, partly on board ship, and partly left behind in Sydney:

By midnight all hands knew that the Wydea was doomed. The chief engineer and the mate had finished their inspection and made



their reports to the Master. The vessel had struck the rocky ledge and ridden right up on it to just for'ard of the bridge, ripping her bottom plates out as she went. The soundings under the stern showed seven fathoms. Even in the light swell that was running, her after part was working and groaning loudly with each small lift of the sea. There was no doubt that, should any sort of sea get up, she would break her back and possibly break in halves.

How grateful one is for that phrase "working and groaning"! For that is the only moment of life in the whole paragraph. What a chance for description "Standby" has missed here, with the wrecked ship on the ledge below the cliff and the engineer and the mate "inspecting" the whole scene at midnight! One might contrast the paragraph with a little "inspection" by Conrad—when Jukes in *Typhoon* has gone below to see how the mad Chinese coolies are weathering the crisis:

Jukes convulsively opened the door. The short boatswain peered under his arm.

One of the lamps had gone out, broken perhaps. Rancorous, guttural cries burst out loudly on their ears, and a strange panting sound, the working of all these straining breasts. A hard blow hit the side of the ship: water fell with a stunning shock and in the forefront of the gloom, where the air was reddish and thick, Jukes saw a head bang on the deck violently, two thick calves waving on high, muscular arms twined round a naked body, a yellow face, open-mouthed and with a set, wild stare, look up and slide away. An empty chest clattered turning over; a man fell head first with a jump, as if lifted by a kick; and farther off, indistinct, others streamed like a mass of rolling stones down a bank, thumping the deck with their feet and flourishing their arms wildly. The hatchway ladder was loaded with coolies swarming on it like bees on a branch. They hung on the steps in a crawling, stirring cluster, beating madly with their fists the underside of the battened hatch, and the headlong rush of the water above was heard in the intervals of their yelling. The ship heeled over more, and they began to drop off; first one, then two, then all the rest went away together, falling straight off with a great cry.

Jukes was confounded. The boatswain, with gruff anxiety, begged him, "Don't you go in there, sir."

Allowing for the greater drama that, in this instance—the *Wydea* carried no demented pack of coolies—was not

available to the Australian writer, and admitting that "Standby" can describe the sea when he remembers to, the passage from Conrad is obviously far the more vivid of the two. It is even possible, one fears, that "Standby" would merely have recorded, "Jukes and the boatswain inspected the Chinese coolies."

The difference, essentially, is that Conrad has "taken pains" over his prose. In a volume recently added to Everyman's Library, containing those three masterpieces *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, *Typhoon* and *The Shadow Line*, there is reprinted one of the finest statements ever made on the methods and purposes of great art—Conrad's analysis of his own superb contribution to English prose—which says, in part:

Fiction—if it aspires to be art—appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the innumerable other temperaments, whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion.

All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting and to the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.

The sincere endeavour to accomplish that creative task, to go as far on that road as his strength will carry him, to go undeterred by faltering, weariness or reproach, is the only valid justification for the worker in prose. And if his conscience is clear, his answer to those who in the fullness of a wisdom which looks for immediate profit, demand specifically to be edified, consoled, amused; who

demand to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked, or charmed, must run thus: My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts; encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

Well, it is in this way that sea-water is made wet. It is not asked—though the great achievement must remain as the criterion—that every writer should be a Conrad, but only that he should “go as far on that road as his strength will carry him”.

Most of the faults of “Standby’s” writing are, as he demonstrates when at his best, easily remediable. For instance (it is astonishing how slight a carelessness can damage a whole story), one of his major failings is a reluctance, when attempting to describe both ships and the sea, to use adjectives of colour.

Again, there is the use of clichés—usually, the clichés of his profession. Three times in his introduction, for instance, “Standby” remarks that the Australians who sailed the small ships up to New Guinea “did a splendid job”. Instead of a description of the weather, we are offered the information that “visibility was *nil*”. “The father of all waves” is submitted as an adequate description of a gigantic wave. A ship’s boy is “bursting with pride” . . . small boys, “Standby” should have reminded himself, burst all too rarely.

As there is hackneyed language, so there is, sometimes, what might be described as a hackneyed point of view. In “Here Comes the Bride”, for instance, told from a long distance with a sort of hearty jocularly, the bride is never described, nor does “Standby” appear to have given the slightest consideration to the problem of why a charming barmaid—being newly married to someone not of a ship’s company—should arouse a crew to raucous mirth and rage. If one imagines what a carnival of amorous frivolity de Maupassant would have made of this incident, it immedi-

ately becomes apparent that the extraordinary timidity of sailors where women are concerned—from which even Conrad suffered—has made the author view the scene as guiltlessly as do the men he is writing about.

Nevertheless, this is by no means altogether a disadvantage to "Standby's" stories, that he should write as a seaman. "It is not so much the great talent, as the great soul that makes the great writer," said Macneile Dixon, pondering on the little faults and the great virtues of Scott:

With us, pity for ourselves, pity for our neighbours, has drowned all other virtues. But the sorrows of the world are not new sorrows, and men before our time have endured them. More even than his talents, I admire in Scott the iron in his soul, the "No surrender" resolution. He is of the noble army in whose company we experience a lifting, not a sinking, of the heart.

Making due allowances for scale—a book of short stories against the vast output of Scott—the same tribute must be paid to *Little Known of These Waters*. "Standby" writes about men, and writes like a man. And one does not read sea-stories only to sink into cool waters, but to experience "a lifting of the heart". Once in the *Winnibelle* and once in a motor-boat, Marin-Marie crossed the Atlantic single-handed: one's heart certainly does not sink on reading the record of these magnificent adventures. "Standby" describes Australian seamen facing, in craft barely seaworthy, all the dangers of storm and warfare in the (then) practically uncharted waters of the North, and he makes one very glad that such men have found a chronicler.

Marin-Marie, a good deal of whose book amounts to a manual for yachtsmen, hardly "aspires to art", so that it would be inappropriate to discuss his faults of style and construction—not all due to the translation from the French. The book will delight yachtsmen, and is a pleasant piece of general reading. But *Little Known of These Waters* does aspire to art. If "Standby" can do as well as this, he will have to sail under Conrad's orders, for, of course, a writer should have both the "great soul" and the great talent. And, in

spite of his faults, he has already done so well that "Jellicoe", "The Voice of a Ship", "A Matter of Loyalty" and "Too Late" would please Conrad himself.

Quite apart from their interest as "documentary" writing on the war, these stories should make a place for "Standby" among Australian short-story writers of the day. Here as overseas the average experimental effort is too much concerned with the sickness of little souls—there is something hysterical and unmanly about the whole "modernist" movement in art and letters; and the better sort of Australian work is almost exclusively concerned with the bush. Both categories could do with a dash of salt water, just as assuredly as Sydney, at the moment of writing, could do with a southerly.

## GLORY AND CATASTROPHE

How many novelists can see their characters, going through the usual procedure of love and hate that make up a life, as involved in "glory and catastrophe"? Among recent novelists, Conrad, of course; he had the heroic vision. And D. H. Lawrence, whose writing had the true intensity of tragedy. A new novel by the Australian Christina Stead—*For Love Alone*—belongs as assuredly as her earlier work in that high company.

It is possible that Christina Stead's work derives from Lawrence. In the very minor matter of punctuation—which might be an indication of something more important—she has Lawrence's trick of using the comma where the normal device would be a semi-colon or full stop, particularly in dialogue. Her theme, "For Love Alone", could, of course, suggest the influence of Lawrence; as, too, more strongly than anything else, could the intangible "climate" of the book, the impression it gives of desperate struggle under a stormy sky. There are, too, certain resemblances to the writing of Virginia Woolf.

But these comparisons are certainly not to be taken in any way as a disparagement: rather, as a compliment. Whether Lawrence was the first in modern times to travel the steep and stony path Christina Stead climbs, and, by his passing, made the going a little easier, or whether she simply happens to have in common with Lawrence and Dostoievsky a particular kind of tragic power, she "imitates" no one. There is a profoundly original talent speaking in *For Love Alone*, something wild and fierce and fearless that tempts one to use the word "genius".

"Glory" and "catastrophe" (like "genius") are large words; all very well, one would think, for *Antony and*

*Cleopatra*, but this is a story about a girl from Watson's Bay, just inside Sydney Heads, who hankers for a trip to London . . . Not a very large theme, it might appear. But *Antony and Cleopatra*, after all, was a play about a girl who had two lovers; and Teresa Hawkins is going to London to meet Jonathan Crow—and, when she has found out what he is, will leave him for James Quick, and will not even then find an end to glory and catastrophe. It is all a matter of how these things are written; how effective the style; how clearly the author portrays his characters; how movingly he dramatizes them; and, above all, with what degree of intensity he is able to animate the whole work.

Consider it at its simplest—a landscape of Watson's Bay—and Christina Stead's style is unmistakably excellent:

People sat in their moist warm gardens, talking and hitting out at the mosquitoes; the smell of eucalyptus oil and pipe-smoke reached out. Across the harbour, on the oyster-coloured water, a large Manly ferry full of lights moved southwards towards the city. She felt the swarm of lovers thick as locusts behind her when she turned into the beach path. Tied up to the fourth pile of the wharf was a rowing boat covered with a tarpaulin. Under the tarpaulin was a woman's body; she had been fished out of the sea just outside the cliffs that afternoon; it did not cause much comment. They lived there, among the gardens of the sea, and knew their fruits; fish, storms, corpses, moontides, miracles.

But it is not simply that the words are used capably and pleasantly; nor—though these are the first essentials—that the scene is clear and rings true. There is a tang, a richness, an unexpectedness in this prose. The whole book—the writing itself—is full of fish, storms, corpses, moontides, miracles. The description of a woman in London, for instance:

Manette was a volcanic, savage, cold and melancholy woman who could have been satisfied by no civilized or metropolitan man. She had dashed herself from affair to affair in a brutal Bohemia and at the age of thirty-eight had drifted into a permanent householding with an easygoing fellow who never intended to marry because of the "covetousness of marriage". He had stuck to her because of her primitive force. She could always force him, in the last resort, by her deep, broken, anguished voice, her yells and the horrors of

her soul which she put into words, to quell and terrify him. How many times had she threatened to commit suicide, and to murder, with such wild looks, with staring eyes, loosened hair, glabrous cheeks, black shouting mouth and the stormy throwing about of her thick-set powerful body; he never had the heart to oppose her.

A piece of writing one would not forget in a hurry. And, too, an unforgettable portrait of a woman: an indication of Christina Stead's capabilities in the delineation of character. The masterpiece of the novel—its surest full-length portrait—is Jonathan Crow. Jonathan is a monster. A flirt, a sadist, a masochist: sly, vain, self-pitying, bright, arch, cruel; learned in a shallow, cynical, perverted sort of way—a hanger-on of the universities; a humanitarian; a man charming, destructive, dead. "I never knew such a twisted soul," says James Quick. And Teresa, when she is beginning to learn what he is—"Her pulses leaped, how strange he was; complex, perverse, ignorant of himself! She drew in her breath sharply. He fascinated her."

The analysis of this "fascinating" and detestable character is beautifully done. It reminds one of Conrad looking down from a great height at Mr Verloc and the anarchists, looking coldly, contemptuously, mercilessly; with a complete understanding, and with even a kind of bleak admiration for the energy with which destroyed men pursue their abominable destinies.

"I never heard such a statement from a man," Quick says when Jonathan has told him how he loved to torture Teresa—how he took more delight in rejecting her love than he could ever have found in accepting it; "I never heard such a statement from a man. Dostoevsky is nothing to it, layer after layer peeled off and he went on revealing himself into the lower depths, satanic depths." The novelist has unconsciously paid herself a compliment here—"Dostoevsky is nothing to it"—and she comes near enough to deserving it.

"It isn't analysis that gets you anywhere in these human beings," Christina Stead allows Jonathan to say somewhere in one of his moments of wisdom; "it isn't analysis, but touch." And "touch", in a novel, means dramatization: to



hear the characters speak, to watch the talk mount into action, to be present at the clash of the actors.

In *For Love Alone* there is perhaps more talk than action; yet the building of the drama between Jonathan and Teresa is all the better for its slowness, and it is enlivened by scenes—such as when Jonathan laughingly reveals that he has left unopened some of Teresa's impassioned letters to him from Australia—that are as extraordinary as they are powerful. When the crisis is reached—the pair in a deserted sawmill on a stormy night, coming to an abyss of despair and hate—it is as if some dark river had crashed at last, at long last, over the cliff towards which it had been swirling; then, in the happier last chapters, to run shining to the sea.

The passion of the book, its restless impetus, comes from Teresa. In some respects she is not wholly credible as a character. Her complete rejection of love—except in Jonathan's letters—in the central chapters when she is starving and saving for her trip to London, seems inconsistent with the portrait drawn in the opening at Watson's Bay. Possibly this could be justified, outside the novel, by the explanation that the central chapters are skimmed; but the objection would remain that here, as throughout the story (as indeed is admitted), Teresa is driven not so much by love as by "a great destiny". The novelist hints that Teresa will become a writer, but she has not stressed the point sufficiently. A fully convincing Teresa would have to be genius first and woman second; this one is the reverse. The starvation chapters remind one of the unsatisfactory episode of Macca in *The Pea Pickers*, to the heroine of which Teresa has a close resemblance.

As well as the skimming of the central section, there is a fault of construction in the fact that fascinating minor characters—Teresa's father, and an Aunt Bea—are suddenly dropped completely out of the story. But the tremendous vitality of the book, embodied in Teresa, triumphantly overrides criticism. It is a work of the highest quality.

## BOOKS AND THE PLATYPUS

Books after a fortnight's holiday in the bush . . .

A slow brown creek meanders between the mountains; a place remote and lonely, where a grey kangaroo might be surprised on a stony slope, ears pricked, sitting up erect and tense, trying to look like a stump and doing very well until he bounds prodigiously for cover, racing, springing, bumping, dwindling among the trees and looking much more like a kangaroo than a stump—though more like an apparition than anything out of either the animal or vegetable worlds . . . so graceful, so fleeting, so improbable.

There were other unexpected visitors; or, rather, inhabitants. That "rise" at dusk in the long pool, not the deceptive smack and splash of a little fish who thinks that a moth must be taken with a rush because there may never be another on his roof, but the slow, heavy swirl that only a big trout makes, a kind of heave of the waters. There, again, in the centre, out from the straggling wattles . . . the glimpse of a brown side . . . big . . . but surely too big for a trout; and the surface broken by too big, too oily a ripple. The big fish now should quietly be sucking in their supper; not swirling or gulping, but sucking; rising with the great mouth open, sipping down the fly, making the gentlest of rings on the water as if, from below, they had breathed on the darkening mirror. Though sometimes . . . And then he "rises" again, five yards away; he bulges to the surface; and it is a platypus.

"*Look for the scrap of velvet brown,*" Paterson wrote. But this is more than a scrap; he lies full-length on the stream, floating in his brown fur, the duck-bill half submerged, the black eyes watching. Will he stay? What now? There is a motion that swimmers call "bottoms-up". He performs it.

The dive sends a splashing sound into the night and a wavelet runs swiftly across the pool from which the platypus has vanished. Again, more like an apparition than an animal—if that's what he is; so graceful, so fleeting, so improbable.

The problem, after keeping such company and returning to the world of letters is why among three books, none without merit, Charles Morgan's *Reflections in a Mirror* should seem more attractive than Jean Devanny's *Bird of Paradise*, and C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* the most pleasing of all.

In her first chapter Miss Devanny herself has gone bush. She travels among the timbermen of North Queensland, describes their lives and recounts their lore: "The best cutting timber is silky oak, because the heart doesn't pop and pinch the saw like a lot of other timbers." And later when she meets some "dinky-di" Australians of the outback and hears tales of danger from the blacks in the early days, or when she visits Mr St John Robinson's three thousand acres of private zoo in North Queensland and watches him feeding his thirteen crocodiles, or when, among the cane farmers, she hears the history of a cassowary named Jerry, her explorations range from the interesting to the captivating:

"Another bad habit he [Jerry, the cassowary] had was pinching the kids' marbles. Perhaps he thought they were quandong fruits. Besides the dinkum marbles, they would use some old ball-bearings about an inch in diameter. Up would come Jerry and gobble them up. As many as twelve ball-bearings at a time. When the kids chased him you could hear them rattling inside him."

Writing of this kind might well be accepted as a contribution to civilization of the kind that Charles Morgan approves throughout *Reflections in a Mirror*, to describe which he borrows a phrase from Talleyrand, "*la douceur de vivre*":

The idea of poetry is intertwined with the idea of "*la douceur de vivre*", which is the minor poetry of life—the word "minor" being used not in disparagement but as an indication of scale. It is that good in life which is bounded by the words "grace", "charm", "quiet", "gaiety", "sweetness", "light".

True, the quotation about the cassowary is not particularly graceful prose; but it is reported dialogue, in which warmth, colour, rhythm and verisimilitude are more important than pretty sounds; and as such it is satisfactory. Moreover, when she is using her own words to describe the weather and the scenery, Miss Devanny does often write gracefully. And whether she is using the language well herself, or is accurately reporting the natural speech of farmers and bushmen, she has—at not too distant intervals—a “charm”, a “gaiety”, a “light” about her work because of the feeling behind it; an interest in the oddities of nature, a love for the Australian earth—hardly, one would think, a passion for either, but quite enough affection to prevent these sections of her book from jarring on a mind that still has the figure of a platypus in one of its eyes and a kangaroo in the other.

But this is to consider only the merits of the book. *Bird of Paradise* does jar—badly. To come back from the country and be confronted with Miss Devanny’s preface is like running headlong into a tram: “He interrupted me. ‘Books! This is not a time for writing books! What we want from writers these days are short, passionate appeals to action. Stuff that can be got out quickly on a big scale.’”

With that first wild hoot of “Books! Books!” the World is upon us. War, politics, controversy, exclamation marks. *La douceur de vivre* has departed.

Miss Devanny is reporting a discussion with a “friend” to whom she had confessed her desire to write a book in war-time. When she has argued that she must write for her living, permission is granted:

“Oh, all right. If that’s how it is you had better go ahead and write it. But, mind you, you can only justify yourself as a writer these days by getting among the people, by studying the people, getting the facts and making your book a contribution to the war effort and the peace that will come after it.”

So Miss Devanny went out and “got the facts” about all sorts of people—fettlers, munition workers, Mrs Eleanor

Dark, Mr Alfred Hill, aboriginals, a Communist, Mme Helene Kirsova, the secretary of Actors' Equity—and made a book that any Australian would read with interest. She asked everybody what he or she was doing for the "war effort" and, naturally, everybody said he was doing splendid things for the "war effort". She asked everybody what he or she thought should be done in the "New Order" and, naturally, the fettler thought something should be done for fettlers, the aboriginals thought something should be done for aboriginals, Mr Alfred Hill thought something should be done for the music of Mr Alfred Hill (in which he was perfectly correct); and so on.

And so on until it becomes truly delightful to learn that the cassowary does not think anything at all should be done for cassowaries in the New Order, and that the thirteen crocodiles are not even interested in the "war effort".

These, it may be, are reprehensible sentiments; even "escapist". Political and sociological books have their uses and one cannot reasonably ask from all literature the full measure of that "*douceur de vivre*" which Charles Morgan finds in the novels of Turgenev. As Morgan admits, the territory of the idea is limited; it "does not extend to the vital epic, the ardours and endurances". Miss Devanny does deal in the epic, the ardours and endurances. But so does Morgan, whose essays are nearly all related to the war; and so does C. S. Lewis, whose novel—the third of a trilogy of which the earlier volumes were *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Peregrinatio*—is a parable of the menace of science and the gullibility of the intellectual Left.

If Miss Devanny makes the problems of Australian humanity difficult to read about, the fault is her own. Her subject-matter is beyond reproach; it is not necessary to criticize her ideas in detail—presumably a Leftist in politics, she has done her best to be impartial, and has succeeded at least in sounding forgiving. The great fault is the style. Charles Morgan's thought—one might sum it up as a liberal conservatism—is expressed with a beautiful precision:

A young man of today—Turgenev's posterity—who goes to "On the Eve" or "Torrents of Spring" to be made happy and wise, will not be, and ought not to be, greatly troubled for Turgenev's approach to the Nihilists or his distance from them. What matters in Elena after eighty-four years is what matters in all Elenas after eighty-four years—"the young girl's soul". Nothing else is of enduring interest except her body and the art which created her. It was the knowledge that this is true of love-stories, and that no contemporary symbolism can make it less true, which led Tolstoy, as a moralist, to repudiate novels.

Reading *That Hideous Strength*, too, one pauses at intervals all the way through to admire some felicity of style; either a fine piece of clear-thinking or some flash of wit: "Husbands," says Mrs Dimble, "were made to be talked to. It helps them to concentrate their minds on what they're reading—like the sound of a weir." But Miss Devanny far too often writes like this:

Eleanor Dark's appreciation of the unity and harmony of all aspects of her own environment lends weight to her credence and philosophy in respect to the needs and social shortcomings of less fortunately-placed Australian writers. Though she herself fears the contrary. She talks as though she feels that some sort of guilt attaches to an expression on her part of opinion regarding the tendency of some writers to regard their writing as subsidiary to political and social activity.

There is a curious nervousness about this jargon, a groping, as it were, not for the "right" word but for placatory words, as if Miss Devanny feared that some inquisitor—perhaps the "friend" who cried "Books! Books!"—would use her writings in evidence against her. And the same political timidity is possibly responsible for the unnaturalness of most of the dialogue. If it seems at times, as when she speaks of the "verdant vicinage" or (in the mixed metaphor on page 62) the "pith" of a river, that Miss Devanny's Muse is capable of erring without the threat or temptations of politics, it should not be forgotten that her "friend" ordered her to "justify herself as a writer" not by writing well but by "getting the facts" that would be politically useful: on which principle, of course, a Government report

on, say, soil erosion, or psittacosis, would be a greater work of literature than *Macbeth*. The New South Wales postal directory is a valuable collection of socially useful facts, but one is not usually invited to criticize it as a work of literature.

"I have been at pains," Miss Devanny says in that regrettable preface—so much worse than what is, after all, an entertaining and informative book—"I have been at pains to include the environmental influences at work in each section of our people and in the individuals, considering that to be of more value than literary form."

To which Charles Morgan replies, "Form is not, as the heathen suppose, a decoration, a frosting of the glass through which meaning comes, but a purification of it."

Morgan is attacking here the trend towards chaos in contemporary prose—specifically in Theodore Dreiser's novels—but the quotation serves equally well for a rebuttal of that fantastic statement that "environmental influences" are of "more value than literary form". Form is not, as Miss Devanny's "friend" may suppose, a decoration in literature but the very heart of it, the *sine qua non* . . . for without form a book is nothing, as a man is nothing without his inner integrity; as the universe without form would be nothing. And form in literature, which is a microcosm of the form of the universe, has a great deal to do with forming the mind and the soul of man . . . which, one hopes, is the first concern of the sociologist. Nations and men are not made wise and great by shoddy prose.

That is why one asks for something of the *douceur de vivre* even in a work concerned with the "ardours and endurances": the best possible prose, the clearest possible crystallization into form; and the greatest degree possible of truly creative energy—for that, too, that above all, is a "grace". "The territory is restricted—but is wide enough if we remember what meaning was given to quiet at Little Gidding and what Matthew Arnold intended by 'sweetness and light'."

And that is why, in spite of its unprepossessing title, *That Hideous Strength* is more attractive than even Charles Mor-

gan's essays. Apart from minor objections—the “fashionable iciness of criticism” which Morgan attacks in other writers (presumably Eliot) but is not altogether free from himself; and his blind approval of everything French, even Baudelaire—*Reflections in a Mirror* calls for nothing but praise. The writing is always capable and sometimes beautiful; the thought is that of a fine and balanced mind. Only, an expression of his reflective rather than his creative powers, it is not quite the same thing as a new novel by Charles Morgan.

C. S. Lewis's ideas on art and politics are very much in agreement with those in *Reflections in a Mirror*. Criticizing “the stale vanguard of the Leftists” Charles Morgan writes:

They will say that truth consists in the notebooks of a “mass-observer” and in repudiation of such pretty simpletons as Keats. Much depends, indeed almost everything (including the peace of the world) depends, upon whether the young man who is being born now accepts or rejects these intellectual justifications of despair. The power of these men depended upon the skill with which they played upon the emotion of self-pity.

Dealing with the menace to individual personality of regimentation by the Left, Morgan says, “The supreme insolence of the regimenters, and their most profound delusion, is their belief that “the masses” exist.

C. S. Lewis, analysing Mark Studdock, the typical intellectual of the day, whose destructiveness and threatened destruction form the central story of this “modern fairy-tale for grown-ups,” observes:

His education had had the curious effect of making things that he read and wrote more real to him than things he saw. Statistics about agricultural labourers were the substance; any real ditcher, ploughman or farmer's boy, was the shadow. Though he had never noticed it himself, he had a great reluctance, in his work, ever to use such words as “man” or “woman”. He preferred to write about “vocational group”, “elements”, “classes” and “populations”; for, in his own way, he believed as firmly as any mystic in the superior reality of things that are not seen.

Charles Morgan attacks formlessness in writing. C. S.



Lewis has Mark Studdock shut in a room of surrealist horror pictures (the usual mutilated woman; "a giant mantis playing a fiddle while being eaten by another mantis" and so on):

At first sight most of them seemed rather ordinary, though Mark was a little surprised at the predominance of scriptural themes. . . . When once these questions had been raised the apparent ordinariness of the pictures became their supreme menace—like the ominous surface innocence at the beginning of certain dreams. Every fold of drapery, every piece of architecture, had a meaning one could not grasp but which withered the mind. Long ago Mark had read somewhere of "things of that extreme evil which seems innocent to the uninitiate", and had wondered what sort of things they might be. Now he felt he knew.

He turned his back on the pictures and sat down. He understood the whole business now. Frost was not trying to make him insane; at least not in the sense Mark had hitherto given to the word "insanity". Frost had meant what he said. To sit in the room was the first step to what Frost called "objectivity"—the process whereby all specifically human reactions were killed in a man so that he might become fit for the fastidious society of the Macrobes. Higher degrees in the asceticism of anti-nature would doubtless follow: the eating of abominable food, the dabbling in dirt and blood, the ritual performances of calculated obscenities.

Morgan asks for beauty in art, "*la douceur de vivre*": to "the perverted man," says C. S. Lewis, "it is ugliness itself that becomes in the end the goal of his lechery; beauty has long since grown too weak a stimulant." Morgan asks for song and simplicity in verse, a change from "poetry with a frown": the logical end of the whole "modernist" movement, says C. S. Lewis, ingeniously parodying *Finnegans Wake*, is "the doom of gibberish"—the curse of Babel:

The Deputy Director could not understand this, for to him his own voice seemed to be uttering the speech he had resolved to make. But the audience heard him saying, "Tidies and fogleman—I sheel foor that we all—er—most steeply rebut the defensible, though, I trust, lavatory, Aspasia which gleams to have selected our redeemed inspector this deceiving. It would—ah—be shark, very shark, for anyone's debenture". . . .

The woman who had laughed rose hastily from her chair. The

man seated next to her heard her murmur in his ear, "Vood wooloo" . . . . To each of them it seemed plain that things were just at that stage when a word or so of plain sense, spoken in a new voice, would restore the whole room to sanity. One thought of a sharp word, one of a joke, one of something very quiet and telling. As a result fresh gibberish in a great variety of tones rang out from several places at once.

Both in Morgan's essays and in Lewis's novel there is the most urgent warning to the modern world. Mark Studdock is portrayed as a kind of Faust: he has sold his soul to scientists and super-bureaucrats, who have sold theirs to the devil. But—however necessary they may be—there is not much "gaiety", not much "sweetness and light" about Warnings. Lewis makes a contribution to the grace of life—to civilization—because his warning is embodied in a finished work of art, capable and attractive in its own right.

*That Hideous Strength* is a curious story, like a blend of the scientific romances of H. G. Wells and the mystical novels of John Cowper Powys. Perhaps in its resuscitation of Merlin, its pictures of sinister machinations by scientists, it is more incredible than is acceptable even in fantasy; but the characters in themselves are certainly credible. The familiar Mad Scientist of the talkies and the newspaper "strips"—even before the atomic bomb, popular mythology had singled out the scientist as potentially the villain of the age—has here been made convincing as a human being. The portrait of the Deputy Director is a masterpiece. Mark Studdock and his wife, too, and the conflict between them, are excellently handled.

Lewis's amused and penetrating observation of mankind—heroes and villains alike—gives his novel a surprising warmth and humour; his style gives it grace; his imagination makes it, above all, strange. It is almost as pleasing as the platypus.

## THE DANGEROUS FARCE

It may be that in the long run the censorship of literature is always farcical and always futile. What centuries of buffet-ing the great and robust work of Rabelais has shaken from its mighty shoulders! Trimalchio feasts, Falstaff drinks and Don Quixote rides eternally.

And certainly—though, liking books, one would wish to see literature free in one's own time—there is an element of the farcical even when a contemporary novel is suppressed. In Lawson Glassop's case, for instance, the entire 15,000 copies that had been printed of *We Were the Rats* (banned in New South Wales two years after it was published) had been sold out before the prosecution was begun; and the publishers, still suffering from war-time disabilities, had no immediate intention of reprinting. The whole case, in a sense, was meaningless.

And, of course, the immediate effect of the prosecution was to start everybody reading the book. The present writer's copy has already been seized by four highly respectable citizens in rapid succession—none of whom had ever heard of the book before the ban—and is at present in the 'possession of the father of a family of five; who is hereby requested to withhold it from his young—not for fear of their immortal souls, but in order to preserve it in some faint semblance of its original condition.

A Sydney newspaper has already revealed that one of the first consequences of the ban was that *Who's Who in Australia* invited Mr Glassop to figure in its pages. When a book is suppressed the author instantly becomes famous; and when it is suppressed on the grounds of dealing too much with "the sex theme" it is impossible not to suspect that a wave of interest in "the sex theme" sweeps the whole com-

munity. Which surely cannot have been the intention of the worthy citizens who started the witch-hunt.

And then again, though this is a bitterer kind of farce, it is fantastic to see that while a work of literature is being suppressed on the grounds of "tending to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall" matter far more likely to be damaging is being read every day by hundreds of thousands of readers of the newspapers. On the very day when it was announced that the appeal against the ban on *We Were the Rats* had been dismissed, the Sydney dailies carried in full and lurid detail the most ghastly story of the rape and murder of a child. Since the daily newspapers are not literature, the literary world, as such, is not concerned with what type of material they publish; but there is certainly nothing as inflammatory as that newspaper story in *We Were the Rats*.

And again—though this, too, is not the merriest of farce—it is a peculiar spectacle to see the whole might and majesty of the community arrayed against *two pages* of an Australian novel while a thousand contemporary novels and classics of world literature are just as frank. There is a terrible fear—something very much like the fear of the Gestapo—that prevents the literary world from speaking openly on this point; the fear that every book one names will promptly be seized on and banned. One might perhaps, with reasonable safety, mention Shakespeare. If *We Were the Rats* is bannable under Australian law, we can ban almost every one of Shakespeare's plays; we can ban the whole of the Elizabethan drama and most of the Elizabethan and Cavalier lyrics; the whole of the Restoration comedies; the leading writers of France; several of the very greatest English novelists—the temptation to name them is almost irresistible; we can ban all the principal novels of the Great War; and we can ban most of the leading English and American novelists of today. As, indeed, Judge Studdert implied in the Glassop appeal, "One could by no means

feel assured that they would be immune to the provisions of this Act."

Here, it might seem, the farce begins to become dangerous. And so, in a measure, it is. The Australian Customs Department has already forbidden the Australian public to read a number of the established classics of the world.

But the Customs officials, and the Ministers, are no doubt amiable men; they have left so much unbanned that it is obvious they don't move against a book, generally speaking, unless they are prodded by the wowsers. The same doubtless, goes for the police. We are not really likely to ban all the great books of the world.

No; we pick on Lawson Glassop. Mr Glassop has made the three fatal mistakes of being alive, Australian, and the author of a vital novel. Here the farce becomes immediately and urgently dangerous.

Why is it that, when a book is suppressed, the literary world—the world of practising Australian writers—rises up as one man in protest? Is it, perhaps, that writers are a filthy-minded lot, wallowing in blasphemy and pornography?

Really, that hardly seems likely. Having read the world's literature, writers might well be fairly broad-minded; tolerant; but that, in our civilization of the twentieth century, is usually believed a virtue. Why, then, does Mr Camden Morrisby, the secretary of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, declare that the ban on *We Were the Rats* is "a menace to the growth of Australian literature"?

Obviously, in the first place, to ban a book is to strike directly at a writer's livelihood. Consider some of the facts about Lawson Glassop; he spent five years in the A.I.F., gave up every moment of his spare time in the Middle East to interviewing the men of Tobruk and then to writing a novel in praise of them; now, recently married, he is courageously trying to make his living out of creative writing; and we ban his book and tell him to compromise with his conscience or starve.

But it is more than that. To ban a book is to strike at a writer's whole reason for existence.

Have we given up entirely the noble traditional belief that the creative artist is "inspired"? Then let us at least understand that, fundamentally, men do not write books to make money but to tell the truth about life as they see it. Force a writer to be false to his vision and the game's not worth the candle. Carry censorship to its logical conclusion and you will have no books at all; except—for what they're worth—the works of moral cowards. The sincere and honest writer will leave the country or give up writing.

And censorship is already being carried so far in this country as to be more menace than farce. It is not only the public and official censorship that is fought out in the courts; nor are the occasional secret bannings by the Customs Department the greatest danger. What the Australian writer has most to fear is the *invisible* censorship which prosecution may drive Australian publishers to enforce—the suppression or ruthless sub-editing of manuscripts. Publishers are human; they are not likely to relish being branded "obscene". If Australian publishers do not courageously resist the censorship—even at the cost of being prosecuted again and again—then the last refuge of the honest writer will be gone. For the films and the radio are, of course, hopeless.

Throughout the proceedings against *We Were the Rats* there was a clear note of regret—a wish that Glassop had not written the two pages of "filth" chiefly complained of. Men have felt the same about Shakespeare; and about all those other great but not-quite-respectable authors one does not dare, in Australia, to name. Why, it is asked, did the giants of the world's literature "go too far"? The answer is, simply, they were telling the truth as they saw it; and the sentence that shocks, the page that offends, the moment when the writer's analysis of life reaches its extreme—that is likely to be the absolutely vital moment of his book when the whole truth is revealed. An honest writer cannot sacrifice that extreme moment of truth. If he does—if censorship makes him a liar—the falsity will destroy his whole work.

On this point—the destruction of a work by censorship—

Laurence Olivier's film of *Henry the Fifth* provides a most interesting illustration.

The technical weaknesses of the film have been discussed by two *Bulletin* critics, one in Melbourne, one in Sydney: the cardboard castles, the feeble representation of the battle of Agincourt, the impossible mixture of talkie realism and stage artifice; and the censorship—of all the lines in which Henry threatens or orders dire things to be done to the French. What remains to be stressed is that *all* the faults of the film have their origin in censorship.

The talkie, after a glimpse of Elizabethan London, opens with a scene in the Globe Theatre, showing two doddering, mumbling old clowns indulging in some allegedly comic "business" with a sheaf of papers.

In Shakespeare's play, these two dismal old goats are the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely—ruthless, Machiavellian clerics who, so that they may retain possession of church lands, are prepared not only to furnish the king with a very specious title to the French throne, but to offer him a gigantic bribe to plunge the two nations into war.

"Gracious lord," the archbishop addresses the king:

Stand for your own; unwind your bloody flag.  
 Look back unto your mighty ancestors:  
 Go, my dread lord, to your great-grandsire's tomb,  
 From whom you claim; invoke his warlike spirit,  
 And your great-uncle's, Edward the Black Prince,  
 Who on the French ground play'd a tragedy,  
 Making defeat on the full power of France;  
 Whiles his most mighty father on a hill  
 Stood smiling to behold his lion's whelp  
 Forage in blood of French nobility.

And the Bishop of Ely, portrayed in the film as an utter noodle, urges on the king to war:

Awake remembrance of these valiant dead,  
 And with your puissant arm renew their feats:  
 You are their heir; you sit upon their throne;  
 The blood and courage that renowned them  
 Runs in your veins; and my thrice-puissant liege  
 Is in the very may-morn of his youth,  
 Ripe for exploits and mighty enterprises.

Was the comic "business" introduced into these opening scenes merely with the mistaken idea that it was necessary to relieve a long speech by the archbishop? It may have been so; but the subsequent cuts make it seem more likely that it was a form of censorship by falsification. The film was made in war-time, and the production seems to have been designed throughout to prove that, even centuries ago, England invariably went guiltless to war and never committed atrocities. Since both Shakespeare's plays and English history lay open to the enemy as to our own armies, it was a fantastic procedure; but there can be no other explanation for the censoring of Henry's threats to the citizens of Harfleur when they are reluctant to surrender the town:

. . . Look to see

The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand  
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;  
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,  
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls;  
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes. . . .

When the film and the play are compared, it is obvious that censorship has taken two main lines: to make the play politically and "morally" respectable.

So, for a start, no hint is conveyed of the hypocrisy and savagery of the clerics; nor of Henry's hypocrisy in asking them to "justify" a war he has already decided on. Then there is the omission of the scene in which Henry sends to death the three traitors, Scroop, Cambridge and Grey—English history must have no "fifth columnists".

Next, the film brings on a respectable and pathetic old gentlewoman named Mistress Quickly, whose extremely lewd description of the last hours of Falstaff is slurred over so that it provokes none of the ribald laughter—mingled with a little pathos—that Shakespeare intended. It is quite impossible to recognize in this gentlewoman the gabbling old hen whom Falstaff has so merrily wronged in *Henry the Fourth*; and when Pistol says to Bardolph, "Kiss her soft mouth and march", the effect is all of pathos—never



of that great irony Shakespeare intended; for the real Mistress Quickly has a mouth about as soft as an old boot.

The next important cut is Henry's threat to the people of Harfleur. Next, there are Katharine and Alice. The French princess is learning a few words of English from her servant. Shakespeare constructed this scene precisely as "Mo's" sketches at the Tivoli are constructed today, and it is intended to have just about the same effect. There's a little mild fooling, leading up to an uproarious and far from respectable pun. The film makes everything clear except the pun, and the whole scene in consequence becomes a pretty-pretty piece of girlish nonsense.

Then, another piece of political censorship, out goes Henry's order to kill the French prisoners:

But hark! What new alarum is this same?  
The French have reinforced their scattered men.  
Then every soldier kill his prisoners!  
Give the word through.

By a curious oversight, the French having been our allies in recent times, a French atrocity is permitted to remain—the killing of the boys. But a scene of comedy which follows this pathetic incident—Henry's practical joke on the English soldier he had quarrelled with the previous night—is omitted.

And, finally, some mildly frank and amusing remarks about the proper purposes of marriage are removed from the love-scene between Henry and Katharine, which never achieves its intended boisterousness.

And so, to sum up: because the healthy lewdness has been cut, the film is not as funny as it should be; because of the political censorship, it is not as fierce and dramatic as it should be; because scenes of pathos have been over-emphasized and scenes of comedy omitted, the film is sadder than it should be. And that is the first result of the censorship: comparatively speaking, the film is dull, tame and glum.

However, it was not the playwright's intention merely to entertain. In *Henry the Fifth*, as in all his plays, Shake-

speare set out to tell the truth about people and events. But how can one possibly have the truth about Henry if he is shown extending mercy to a man who has insulted him but is *not* shown executing his friends who have turned traitor? If one is shown him sad before and after a battle and *not* shown him playing practical jokes? If one is shown him indignant at a French atrocity and *not* shown him ferociously threatening to wipe out a whole town? If one is shown him jocular in love but not shown him Rabelaisian?

And as with Henry, so with all the other characters. By far the best performance in the film is given by the actor who plays Fluellen; partly, no doubt, because he is the best of the actors, but also because his lines, being airy nonsense in Welsh, do not have to be hacked about.

And that is the second result of the censorship: character is falsified, history is falsified; the whole thing—a work of literature designed to *form and inform* the human mind—is unreal and a lie. It seems not merely fitting but inevitable that the castles in the film should be made of cardboard and that Katharine should pluck from the fake garden in the fake courtyard fake roses made of paper. And that is exactly the sort of thing that censorship—if it is not vigorously resisted by authors, publishers and the public—will do to Australia. We will not build a sound civilization on a lying literature

## THE MEANING OF HUMOUR

THE first glimpse of the domestic life of animals in Brian James's *Cookabundy Bridge* is mildly amusing but not, it might seem, of any particular significance. It records, without emphasis, the opinions of Billy Rosen's bull and a herd of cows on some bullocks that have been let into their pasturage.

There is a reference to the bovine species again when a small boy, visiting his grandfather, demands loudly to be shown "the old cow with the big sock"; but this is misleading—the old cow with the big sock is grandfather, a somewhat miserly old gentleman believed by his fond descendants to have buried his money under a peach-tree in the days of Jack Lang.

However, there are genuine animals again in the story called "Jacob's Escape". Jacob has been insulted by his wife Elizabeth—in front of the pigbuyer, at that—and is about to leave home "for ever". He encounters Elizabeth's poodle:

Then Jacob went to the house. Elizabeth's poodle, who had always treated Jacob with the contempt poodles have for underlings, was at the door. He ignored Jacob. A long unused rage came over Jacob; he kicked the poodle right across the room. The poodle yelped and whinged, and had a most satisfactory dint in its side. Exultation was only momentary—Jacob was all repentance, but the poodle didn't believe it, and whimpered under the sofa.

Nobody who has ever wished to be unkind to a poodle—and who has not?—could fail to respond to this paragraph. Brian James's animals begin to challenge the attention. How accurately the poodle's mind, if not its body, is described—that whimpering under the sofa! And there follows a note on that moody and malevolent tribe, the blue cattle-dogs:

The house was all darkness now, and a big moon was rising over the Cookabundy Ranges into the clear winter sky. Jacob set out and sneaked blunderingly through the orchard. Sailor, the blue cattle-dog, came down to inspect him. Sailor sniffed non-committally, and then went back to his corn-sack at the kitchen door. At least it could be said of Sailor that he treated Jacob tolerantly—almost as an equal.

The next story, "Punch and Lightning", is woven around a pair of horses. Brian James tells, among other anecdotes, how Sammy, owner of the horses, once sacked a man who did not understand them:

He [Choom] tried, purely from a sense of duty, to get greater speed out of Punch and Lightning by flicking them with the reins—a treatment not understood and much resented. Bad relations having been firmly established, Choom heaved a big hard clod at Punch, taking him at or near the butt of the tail. With becoming modesty, Punch jammed his tail down tight. A second clod similarly placed on Lightning led to mutiny and flight. "I sacked him then and there, sick as I was," said Sammy. No doubt Choom deserved it.

Bullocks, Billy Rosen's bull, cows, dogs, horses—the domestic menagerie is increasing rapidly. And, in a sense, accidentally.

These humorous and realistic portraits are, of course, different in every way from the usual "animal stories" which are intended as a kind of escape into the wilds—*Man-Shy*, or *Tarka the Otter*—and which, though Brian James's refreshing freedom from sentimentality is worth noticing in relationship to them, have other, more poetic virtues. Brian James does not intend to compete in this field; nor, even, did he set out in *Cookabundy Bridge* to create a portrait-gallery of domestic animals. The book is concerned with the human animal; who, male or female, comic or tragic, drunk or sober, alive or dead, is painted to perfection. "Jacob's Escape" is not really about the poodle or the cattle-dog, but about Jacob; and in its understanding of character, its subtle blending of comedy and pathos, its profundity of human wisdom and its complete mastery of form, it is as fine a short story as has ever been written in the world. It would do

credit to de Maupassant. "Gant and His Horses"—that unforgettable picture of a hard and repellent man who, when his horses are killed in an accident, weeps—is not really about the animals, but about Gant. And it is a masterpiece.

But so, too, in a minor way, is the pig named Dolf, who, in a story of that macabre comedy which seems appropriate to his race, is threatened with a dreadful death:

Dolf had not been fed since the previous midday, for old Charlie held that you couldn't starve them enough in the day or two before killing. But that was something you couldn't well explain to Dolf so that he'd clearly understand. He was spending most of his time with his front feet on the top rail of his sty, head just above the rail, and giving voice to his resentment at the way he was being treated. He had good lungs, and so the world learned that Dolf had a definite grievance. He kept his little, wicked eyes on the house, and at the slightest sign of any movement there he raised his squealing to undreamt-of heights.

The buckets were swung on the galley, and old Charlie touched off the fire. Big Jack strolled over to interview Dolf, spoke pleasantly to him, and reached out to feel his broad back and scratch it. Dolf reckoned all this had no reference to honest tucker, grunted very gutturally and suspiciously, and retired to the middle of his pen. A much less intelligent pig than Dolf would have seen something foully wrong with all this easy familiarity from a comparative stranger.

Casually, then, simply because he likes animals, is amused by them and can't resist writing about them, Brian James has stocked, as it were, a whole countryside in these stories. To complete the survey, one should mention—not forgetting the delightful "Cows in the Lane" and a score or more admirable horses, for which he has the special affection of all good Australians—the fowls, "lorded over by a very rakish-looking red rooster" who took possession of the veranda in "The Casey Country", and the cat named Tibby, "mother of thirty", who sat on the "heasy chair" John Henry had bought for his wife on "Cheque Day".

But while Brian James has thus "accidentally" been filling the odd corners of his stories with sketches of the domestic animals, he has unconsciously been giving the

clearest possible proof that his stories are in the richest and most truly Australian tradition: that of Steele Rudd, Lawson, Dyson, Furphy and Eve Langley.

No one who has read *The Pea Pickers* could forget the mare named Seldom-fed, upon whose back rode Steve and Blue and Charlie and Pricie-ole-man in the thunderstorm after they had stolen Sullivan's oranges. Furphy has his horses and his bullocks; Dyson spent one of the funniest nights in Australian literature trying to prevent a cow from sharing his lean-to beside a shack in the bush; Steele Rudd's Joe—that marvellous and monstrous boy—has his ants and his snakes and his lizards and his mice and that unfortunate dog which mistook him for a kangaroo; and Lawson, of course—who could forget "The Loaded Dog" and "Bill, the Ventriloquial Rooster"?

Round and round the woodheap they went, and round the shed, and round the house and under it, and back again, and round the woodheap and over it and round the other way, and kept it up for close on an hour. Bill's bill was just within an inch or so of the game-rooster's tail-feathers most of the time, but he couldn't get any nearer, do how he liked. And all the time the fellers kept chyackin' Page and singing out "What price y'r game 'un, Page? Go it, Bill! Go it, old cock!" and all that sort of thing. Well, the game-rooster went as if it was a go-as-you-please, and he didn't care if it lasted a year. He didn't seem to take any interest in the business, but Bill got excited, and by and by he got mad. He held his head lower and his wings further and further out from his sides, and prodded away harder and harder at the ground behind, but it wasn't any use. Jim seemed to keep ahead without trying. They stuck to the woodheap towards the last. They went round first one way for a while and then the other for a change, and now and then they'd go over the top to break the monotony; and the chaps got more interested in the race than they would have been in the fight—and bet on it, too. But Bill was handicapped with his weight. He was done up at last; he slowed down until he couldn't waddle, and then, when he was thoroughly knocked up, that game-rooster turned on him, and gave him the father of a hiding.

To analyse the subtle differences in the writing of Lawson, Furphy, Eve Langley and Brian James would be a

fascinating theme for an essay; and some day the scholars will be doing it. The wonderful effects Lawson could get with his sketchy construction and his spare, harsh, colloquial style; the wild fantasy and poetry that lift *The Pea Pickers* quite above the ordinary stream of Australian prose; the bubbling good humour and the firm grip of the Australian earth that just—and only just—redeem *Such Is Life* from an arch and academic remoteness. . . . If Brian James falls short of Eve Langley in any respect it is in passion and imagination; Lawson's genius, too, may have burned with a fiercer flame; if he surpasses all three in any respects it is in maturity and readability, for his prose flows far more smoothly and richly than Lawson's, he never repels the reader with Lawson's sentimentality or dejection, and he is free from Furphy's intolerable discursiveness.

However, it is not with differences that the present survey is concerned, but with similarities; and, in particular, with the coincidence that Brian James can describe a horse or a pig as accurately and amusingly as Lawson described a rooster.

It is, of course, no chance coincidence but an inevitability. Brian James is in no way imitating Lawson—his style and his method are altogether different. But, like Lawson's, his stories grow directly out of the Australian earth. Possibly the first requirement for writers of this kind is that they should be able convincingly to paint a blade of grass. Brian James's landscapes are certainly both convincing and lovely; and his animals—which live closest to the earth—are triumphantly alive. To think as a pig thinks, without false sentiment, is no mean achievement. It is a sign of humility; of a proper reverence for the humblest creatures of the earth; a guarantee that when the author approaches human beings he will portray them with an equal realism.

As, of course, Brian James does. Small boys and grandfathers, spinsters and housewives, successful men and failures, hard men and easy-going men, religious men and scoundrels, he treats them all with the same amused respect as he pays to Billy Rosen's bull. One is meeting really, in

*Cookabundy Bridge*, a fully-matured mind; and it is at once astonishing and appropriate that it should have expressed itself with such completeness: the mastery of style and form, the tolerance and balance of outlook, the unfaltering understanding of character, the comprehensive view of the human scene that ranges from infancy to old age, from the cradle to the coffin; and the breadth of the emotional range that extends the whole distance from the tragedy of a drowned child to the drama of "Shots in the Orchard" and the earthy comedy of "Hawkins's Pigs".

Though there are stories of the city, the suburbs and the sea, in its total effect *Cookabundy Bridge* is a book of country comedies. It is the life of the Australian earth; and to Brian James as to Lawson and Steele Rudd, that life—the distillation of it in art—is primarily humorous. The *worst* of it is humorous. In "Bungally", Tully and his two boys are breaking their hearts clearing the scrub on sandstone country.

They'd never make tucker, they said, on the job. They'd starve on it. But Tully was afraid of the laws of contract.

Henry, the elder boy, was more enterprising. He broke out in boils, big painful boils. He grew quite affectionate towards the boils, particularly towards a livid specimen under his arm. It grew septic, and his heart rejoiced in the pain of it and the danger of it. It was better than bungally. Besides, his mother and the girls were at home alone. It wasn't right that they should be alone, and they should know about that boil and have the chance of tending it. So Henry went home and stayed there, sending reports, from time to time, of new and more terrible boils.

Meeting Henry, his boils and the bungally, one again recalls Steele Rudd, just as one does on meeting Brian James's animals. This is the old ruthless Australian humour, the comedy of the conquest of the land: dry, a bit crude, earthy and valiant.

The land is maddening. Its immensity and its obstinacy drive the labourer to frenzy. It is not a little difficulty to weep at; it is a struggle so vast that, short of running amuck with Tully, all the Australian mind can do is to collapse in gigantic laughter.



Just then Tully appeared near a smouldering heap of roots. It had been a very big fire, and the ring of coal and ash covered a wide area. Tully walked to the edge of the ring, and then away to gather an armful of the small roots scattered round. He lifted these above his head and threw them savagely into the centre. Then he rushed into the hot coals and kicked the new fuel out. He danced around the fire and through it, and kicked charred skulls of bungally in, and then kicked them out again. At last he stopped and raised clenched fists to the heavens, and the flood-gates of his wrath were broken. He cursed the bungally and the land it grew on and the sky above it. . . . He cursed Henry for getting boils. He cursed every soul that lived in such a district. He cursed the blacks who once owned the country—but, in fairness to them, he conceded that they were more decent than the “cows” who owned it now. Then he cursed the ancestors of all concerned.

It was a great performance, especially so as Tully had the reputation of being a religious man.

Here is Tully in a frenzy, and he is amusing; here is all the heart-breaking stubbornness of the Australian earth and one feels that Brian James—even Tully, perhaps—is somehow proud of that stubbornness, and pleased with it; here is a great cursing of Australia, and the cursing is an assurance that both Tully and the author love their country.

It is the humour that makes the frenzy pleasing; humour that reconciles the Australian mind to the mulishness of the Australian earth.

And that is the great task and purpose of humour—reconciliation. In *The Art of Growing Old* John Cowper Powys had some words to say on that subject:

It almost looks as if to Rabelais and Cervantes and Dickens, as to certain Chinese philosophers, the secret of life was to be discovered in a certain quality *in matter itself* which it were difficult not to call a humorous one . . . . The author of *Don Quixote* out of the riches of his crowded experience and out of his genius for profound observation disclosed once for all the startling revelation that the true reality of life is the humour of life.

Powys would probably be prepared to maintain that the Australian bush is a natural clown; if there is a quality of humour “in matter itself”, Tully’s bungally roots were probably doubled up and twisted not with malice or mere obsti-

nacy, but with uproarious secret laughter. As Powys admits the point is difficult to prove.

But it does remain true, as he says, that the reality of life is the humour of life. The reader laughs at Tully's frenzy as the old scrubcutter himself would probably laugh ten years afterwards. It is the essence of experience Brian James is presenting; not the immediate anguish but the ultimate delight.

Inevitably, his humour appears ruthless. Just as Henry Lawson laughed at the dog "loaded" with dynamite or at a woman stung by bees, as Steele Rudd laughed at the troubles of selectors and Furphy at the woes of bullockies, Brian James laughs at scrubcutters afflicted with boils or bungally. Ruthlessness—the divine inhumanity that makes people laugh at men falling off ladders in joke-blocks or at custard-pie comedy at the theatres—is his most striking characteristic.

In "The Well", as in "Bungally", the joke is in the stubbornness and malice of the land. On the advice of a neighbour called Wiseman (whose wife's uncle had been a noted water-diviner) a well is sunk on top of a ridge. When it is proved useless, Wiseman kindly offers to fill it in again:

Wiseman took his time over the filling in. In fact, he took two years over it, and found the well a very useful receptacle for many unwanted things. First he tipped in some dray-loads of old tins, bottles and other rubbish that had littered his place for years. Then the well proved ideal for disposing of windfalls and fly-infested fruit. Dray-loads of oranges and mandarins were tipped in. When Dandie died, he tipped in that faithful old plough-horse, too. At long last he could dump no more, and only a rough cairn of broken rock was left to show where the well had been.

In "First Furrow" the comedy comes from the simple ill-will of neighbour towards neighbour; also from Davie and his ants:

Down the slope, in another jagged hole in the scrub, was Davie—clearing on contract. A great worker, but with a weakness for ants. Davie always had a pickle bottle for staging heroic contests between

red-joes and black-joes—or either of these against twice their number of road ants.

In “Hawkins’s Pigs” the farmhands manage accidentally to poison all the pigs while the boss is away:

Davie looked out, and his eyes goggled. Many excited moments passed in convincing himself that he was really seeing what he saw. Then at last he yelled, “Brid! Brid! Come and look!”

Brid came. What they gazed upon left them too terror-stricken to gather the joy that the sight should have brought to them. Everywhere pigs. Dead pigs. Unmistakably dead. The lordly boar lay beneath the very window, looking twice as large in death. Near by was the Appin sow, if possible more hideous in her mortality. Scattered to left and right were pigs. All the pigs, and all dead.

Davie could speak only in whispers now. He felt that the hand of the Lord had smitten them. A miracle of some sort. Only the fear of Hawkins made him sorry it had happened.

This is a scene that Fielding would have liked. In fact, it might well be the goriest bit of humour since the bucket of pig’s blood was thrown in *Joseph Andrews*. Within the limits of the short story (necessarily a minor art) it is Homeric. Only a writer who looks on life with a true and great gusto would be capable of presenting such a spectacle. It’s interesting to observe that Brian James knew he was being Homeric in this scene: the “lordly” boar is as clearly an echo from Homer as are Fielding’s parodies of the Homeric simile.

And it’s also worth noting that this uproarious ruthlessness is something that has become distinctively Australian. It’s a tough humour. It seemed to go out of the English novel after Fielding; America got a taste of it from Mark Twain; Lawson and Steele Rudd and Furphy brought it to Australia and made it our own. Eve Langley continued the tradition. It is in Norman Lindsay’s novels. Our earth is hard; our humour is hard. It does seem that Powys may have been right when he said that there is a quality of humour in matter itself; certainly our tough, hard humour corresponds to something tough and hard in the soil.

Brian James’s “hardness” is really astounding. The richest

moment in "River Odyssey" (a lovely sketch) is when the "crew", having fallen overboard and been in great danger of drowning, is casually rescued: "He spluttered and panted and was sick—which Monty said was 'only natural'."

In "Joe and Sandy" there is humour—and genuine humour—in the deaths of two ancients, one aged 98 and the other 92. In "Uncle's Career", which deals with Uncle's death, there is humour—and genuine humour—in the fact that his widow still remembers unrelentingly certain small grievances from the first days of their marriage.

There is even something daringly close to humour at the most critical moment in the tragedy of "Brosie". A small boy has been drowned in a dam. The mother discovers the body:

She looked all round about—and then she ran frantically to the waterhole.

Brosie was there sure enough. Dead, in less than a foot of muddy water. . . . A level bough from the grey-gum ran out over the waterhole, a thin, low bough, and half-way along it was a wagtail's nest. That perhaps accounted—But what was the use? What did it matter now? Brosie was gone!

This is a moment of the starkest tragedy (which later, when the mother goes mad and steals a neighbour's child to replace the drowned baby, becomes extraordinarily moving). Nevertheless something that if not exactly humour is certainly very human must be allowed its place—"That perhaps accounted——" Even at that crisis of tragedy the mother's grief and shock are mitigated for a moment by ordinary human curiosity. She wants to know how her child was drowned, why he was drowned. The fact of the death shatters her with grief, one is left in no doubt about that; yet, because she is human and humanity has an indefatigable curiosity, she must allow a commonplace interest in the mechanism of the death to intrude on the flawlessness of the tragedy. For a moment, though only for a moment here, the event is not completely tragic; it is interesting, it is almost entertaining.

This is, in principle, the Drunken Porter coming in to relieve the tragedy of *Macbeth*. The author reminds us, just for a moment, that tragedy is not *finally* tragic. Humanity can bear its griefs. The interruption can be only momentary, or it will spoil the tragedy. If the sun breaks through the clouds for more than a second or two there's no more drama in a thunderstorm.

Brian James has handled the scene perfectly. There is just that moment in which the mother becomes intensely human—and when one sees that she could, if her love of life was stronger than her love for her child, conquer her grief—then the clouds close round her again. The outlook on life which has enabled Brian James to write good comedy enables him also to handle tragedy with perfect good taste: he can strike the mind with awe.

And that, of course, is the proper and only use of tragedy. Sentimentality or depression has no place in it. Its purpose is to awe the mind into the realization that man is more than man; he is under or with the gods.

And comedy, too, though it may seem paradoxical to say so, has a spiritual significance. The purpose of humour is to reconcile man to life on this earth as a passing comedy in which he is not finally involved; to remind him that he might as well enjoy being man while he has to be. Because he views life as a passing show—looking, as it were, from timelessness into time—the humorist appears ruthless; especially in an age in which the sentimental materialism of the Left is the fashion. But his ruthlessness is to be deplored only if it is somehow reprehensible to love life as it is and people as they are. What better service can you do mankind than to make it laugh?

The humorist is the true lover of humanity to whom Henry and his boils, the "crew" who falls overboard, the young couple building their love-nest and then tearing it down again after a quarrel with the mother-in-law, old Jacob escaping from Elizabeth and getting gently drunk with his friend Herman are all infinitely precious, all richly and pathetically human, and all, in the last analysis, comic.

The humorist is the true lover of life to whom not only the graceful landscapes of Summerlea are precious, but also the stubborn bungally, the rotten windfall. Wiseman tips down the well and the boar lordly in death.

Rabelais, Cervantes, Fielding, Dickens, the great names of prose literature are the names of the great humourists. They survive because they looked on the life of their times with timeless eyes. Whether or not Brian James will rank with these masters one could not prophesy on the evidence of a single book of short stories. But *Cookabundy Bridge* is certainly enough to establish him as the natural successor to Lawson and Furphy.

## JUDITH WRIGHT'S POETRY

IN April 1575 at his "pore house in Walkamstowe", . . . George Gascoigne, Esquire, completed his poem "Philomene" and sent it to his "singuler good Lord, the L. Gray of Wilton, Knight of the most noble order of the Garter"; who read:

In sweet April, the messenger to May,  
When hoonie drops do melt in golden showres,  
When every bird records hir lover's lay  
And western windes do foster forth our floures,  
Late in an even I walked out alone  
To hear the descant of the Nightingale.

Times change. When Judith Wright completed the poems of *The Moving Image* she sent them to the Meanjin Press, Melbourne; which read:

How long ago she planted the hawthorn hedge—  
she forgets how long ago—  
that barrier thorn across the hungry ridge;  
thorn and snow

It is twice as tall as the rider on the tall mare  
who draws his reins to peer  
in through the bee-hung blossom. Let him stare.  
No-one is here.

Only the mad old girl from the hut on the hill,  
unkempt as an old tree.  
She will hide away if you wave your hand or call;  
she will not see.

Year-long, wind turns her grindstone heart and whets  
a thorn branch like a knife,  
shouting in winter 'Death'; and when the white bud sets,  
more loudly, 'Life'.

She has forgotten when she planted the hawthorn hedge;  
that thorn, that green, that snow;  
birdsong and sun dazzled across the ridge—  
it was long ago.

Her hands were strong in the earth, her glance on the sky,  
her song was sweet on the wind.  
The hawthorn hedge took root, grew wild and high  
to hide behind.

Times change; but poetry does not. Not in its fundamentals—either in the way it is made or in the effect it has on the reader. The hoonie drops still melt in golden showres. It is a pity George Gascoigne did not live to read four lines of Judith Wright's "Bullocky":

While past the campfire's crimson ring  
the star-struck darkness cupped him round,  
and centuries of cattlebells  
rang with their sweet uneasy sound.

Indeed, a drop of "hoonie"! There are technical explanations for the exquisite melody of this quatrain; and here George Gascoigne may be invited, in his capacity as "first English critic", to demonstrate that criticism, too, does not alter in its essentials down the ages; for Judith Wright's music comes from the subtle alliteration of "c's" and "m's" and "n's", and George, though rightly fearing the tendency of writers of his time to "hunte a letter to death", declared that the device ("being moderately used") would lend "good grace to a verse".

George's precepts, it seems, were better than his practice; a slur not uncommonly cast on the unfortunate tribe of critics. For his "Steele Glas"—a satire one might compare with Dr Johnson's equally heavy-handed "London"—has a wealth of alliteration which looks all the more immoderate in the antique spelling:

I fee and figh (bycaufe it makes me fadde)  
That peufithe pryde doth al the world poffeffe.

"Philomene", though unquestionably hoonied, is hardly



more than an exercise in the fashion of the day, Chaucer sweetened by Euphuism.

George was a man of some parts. He fought for the Prince of Orange against the Spaniards and, being in correspondence with a lady at The Hague—which city was then in the hands of the enemy—was accused of treachery; quite wrongly, for his only error was amorousness. His comings and goings at The Hague caused the burghers to nickname him “The Green Knight”. These green and knightly doings, however—the passion and excitement of them—were but palely reflected in his poetry. In emotional range, in the depth of poetry, Judith Wright is altogether more profound; “The Company of Lovers”, for instance—a tragic and beautiful lyric of the war:

Death marshals up his armies round us now.  
 Their footsteps crowd too near.  
 Lock your warm hand above the chilling heart  
 and for a time I live without my fear.  
 Grope in the night to find me and embrace,  
 for the dark preludes of the drums begin,  
 and round us, round the company of lovers,  
 Death draws his cordons in.

But as a critic, if not as a poet in the highest sense, George is never to be faulted, never tied down in his own period. He has even a word to say on the kind of metre—scansion by “strong” syllables—that Judith Wright uses in the memorable “South of My Days” and in her title poem:—

Listen to the voices mingle, the songs entwine.  
 ‘The world is my heart, the world is love or hate.  
 With these I master the world.’ ‘The world is my body;  
 is what my eyes can see and my hands hold.  
 My strength subdues it; strength will make me great  
 when I, the builder, claim all I build for mine.’  
 But he whose eyes are diamond and as cold  
 sits head on hand, unheeding, passionate,  
 piercing the cloaks of the world, fold after fold.

This is not strict iambic measure; but George Gascoigne would have recognized and approved it;

Also our father Chaucer used the same libertie in feete and measures that the Latinists do use: and who so ever do peruse and well consider his workes, he shall finde that although his lines are not alwayes of one selfe same number of Syllables, yet beyng redde by one that hath understanding, the longest verse and that which has most syllables in it, will fall (to the eare) correspondent unto that whiche hath fewest sillables in it: and like wise that whiche hath in it fewest syllables shall be founde yet to consist of woordes that have such naturall sounde as may seeme equall in length to a verse which hath many moe sillables of lighter accents.

These remarks—which conclude with a lament against the more mechanical scansion Gascoigne felt obliged to employ in his own verses—are quoted from “Certayne Notes of Instruction” written for the benefit of a Master Edouardo Donati, an Italian who aspired to the making of English poetry, reprinted along with “The Steele Glas” and “Philomene” by the English Reprint Society in 1868 under the title *George Gascoigne, Esquire*. The “Certayne Notes” is a masterly little essay, setting down the fundamental principles of poetry so capably that succeeding generations of critics can only rediscover them or, at best, as did Hazlitt and Matthew Arnold, elaborate them. Says George, “The first and most necessary point in making of a delectable poeme is this, to ground it upon some fine invention. For it is not enough to roll in pleasant woordes.”

Judith Wright's lyrical narratives—“The Hawthorn Hedge”, “South of My Days”, “Trapped Dingo”, “Remittance Man”, “The Idler”, “Bullocky”, “Brothers and Sisters” and the charming “Half-Caste Girl”:

Little Josie buried under the bright moon  
is tired of being dead, death lasts too long,  
She would like to push death aside, and stand on the hill  
and beat with a waddy on the bright moon like a gong—

these are all poems grounded upon some fine invention; and, consequently, as the critic prophesies, “pleasant woordes follow well inough and fast inough”.

George's second rule was, “Your Invention being once devised, take heede that neither pleasure of rime nor varietie

of device do carie you from it." And here, too, Judith Wright errs not; for it is remarkable how swiftly and economically is told the story of "Brothers and Sisters," and the same is true of "The Hawthorn Hedge"—a novel compressed into a lyric.

George said further, "Remembre to place every worde in his natural Emphasis or sound"; and a little later, "So would I wishe you to frame all sentences in their mother phrase and proper *Idioma*." And herein he was as modern as Yeats, who advised, "The natural words in their natural order." Judith Wright—"The world is my heart, the world is love or hate"—is certainly not to be faulted on this ground; which is one of the principal reasons why her poetry is modern in the best sense of the term and at the same time admirably traditional.

That same (typical) line—"The world is my heart, the world is love or hate"—fulfills another of Gascoigne's requirements:

The most auncient English wordes are of one sillable, so that the more monosyllables that you use, the truer Englishman you shall seeme, and the lesse you shall smell of the Inkehornc.

"Eschew strange words or *obsoleta* and *inuitata*," says George; and further:

And as much as you may, frame your stile to perspecuity and to be sensible: for the haughty obscure verse doth not much delight, and the verse that is too easie is like a tale of a rosted horse; but let your Poeme be such as may both delight and draw attentive readyng.

There is no tale of a rosted horse in *The Moving Image*, nothing cheap and facile. But there is, perhaps, especially in the title poem, a tendency here and there to the "haughty and obscure verse". Certainly "The Moving Image" is not grounded upon a fine invention—is not essentially, lyrical or narrative or dramatic poetry—but is one of those mystical and philosophical explanations of the universe that every poet since Eliot has felt obliged to attempt; and all of which do a little smack of the Inkehorne. A

fashion of darkly philosophizing may be just as dangerous to poetry in the long run as a fashion of Euphuism. Considering *The Moving Image* as the first book of a young—but not so very young—writer, one must note the comparative smallness of output; a certain lack of joy, spontaneity and simplicity; and, in consequence, an impression of seriousness and, sometimes, strain. "Our unfortunate century", it has been said, "was born middle-aged". One can only hope that, as it grows older, it will grow younger.

Judith Wright's serious and analytical verses hardly deserve in themselves this criticism. Poets must have a licence to explore the universe; and, as George says, "This poetically licence is a shrewde fellow, and covereth many faults." The title poem is not really obscure, not even difficult when given the "attentive readyng" it deserves; moreover it is written with a power and a passion altogether rare in philosophical poetry. The imagery is rich and beautiful and one is aware all the time of the masterly handling of rhythm; strong, like a heart beating. It is the *tendency* that is dimly alarming, for it is towards abstraction and away from everything George Gascoigne believed to be poetry.

But the tendency of the other poems—expressing Australia in terms of heat and surf and cattlebells, humanity in the figures of drovers, bushrangers, the half-caste girl, the "mad old girl on the hill" and the gently terrified "Brothers and Sisters"; and expressing the writer's own richly feminine genius in the imagery of blossoming trees—these promise anything, everything, the world. Judith Wright may well say with the good George Gascoigne, "And (my good Lorde) though the skorneful do mocke me for a time, yet in the ende I hope to give them al a rybbe of roste for their paynes."

## THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT

It is long now since great daemons walked on earth,  
Staining with wild radiance a country bed,  
And leaving only a confusion of sharp dreams  
To vex a farm-girl—that, and perhaps a feather,  
Some thread of the Cloth of Gold, a scale of metal,  
Caught in her hair. The unpastured gods have gone,  
They are above those fiery-coasted clouds  
Floating like fins of stone in the burnt air,  
And earth is only a troubled thought to them  
That sometimes drifts like wind across the bodies  
Of the sky's women.

THE lines are from Kenneth Slessor's "Earth-Visitors", a poem dedicated to Norman Lindsay. The gods, he says, came down to earth in legendary times; they don't now. Except that

There is one yet comes knocking in the night,  
The drums of sweet conspiracy on the pane,  
When darkness has arched his hands over the bush  
And Springwood steams with dew, and the stars look down  
On that one lonely chamber . . .  
She is there suddenly, lit by no torch or moon,  
But by the shining of her naked body.  
Her breasts are berries broken in snow; her hair  
Blows in a gold rain over and over them;  
She flings her kisses like warm guineas of love,  
And when she walks the stars walk with her above.

She knocks. The door swings open, shuts again.  
"Your name, child?"

A thousand birds cry "Venus!"

No other Australian artist has appealed to Australian writers in this way, that poems should be written about him and his work. From the very beginning, from the days when

Hugh McCrae saw him as a beacon blazing in the mountains "Up Springwood way, across the skies" to the week when this article is written and a novel about Tobruk by Lawson Glassop with a Lindsay foreword is on display in the bookshop, Norman Lindsay has been sought out by the writers.

His friendship with McCrae, the interchange of images and ideas that resulted in some of the finest of McCrae's lyrics and the finest of the artist's pen drawings, is a matter of history. He rode with "Banjo" Paterson. Kenneth Slessor and Kenneth Mackenzie both acknowledged his services by dedicating poems and books to him. He decorated Leon Gellert's *Songs of a Campaign*.

In his foreword to Lawson Glassop's novel he mentions how the author came to him with the manuscript of his first novel; scores of beginners—some who have failed, some who have made big names—have come to him over the years in the same way. He was largely responsible for the establishment of the Endeavor Press by the *Bulletin*, and was associated with the whole group of novelists brought out by it. I know of several of Australia's best short-story writers who have put themselves under his tutelage before embarking on the long and difficult voyage of the novel.

Not all Australian writers, of course, have come to him. And some who have come have come to quarrel. That is inevitable. But it is beyond question that the majority of Australian writers—and especially the poets—have accepted him from the beginning not only as an artist but as the fountain-head of the Australian culture in our time. In that fact lies the clue to the meaning and significance of his work.

It is an astonishing thing, when you pause to consider it, that the writers of this country should have accepted a painter as the leader of cultural life. Certainly, he is a good painter. But so was Gruner a good painter; and so was Streeton; and so was Lambert; and so were Blamire Young and Hilder, and so is Hans Heysen: yet nobody would suggest they ever rivalled Lindsay in his unique position

at the head of cultural affairs. Why is it that the writers have turned to Lindsay?

One obvious reason is his skill as an illustrator. But that is hardly a sufficient explanation when nine-tenths of the writers who have approached him did not expect or wish their manuscripts to be illustrated.

There is the magnet of his fame. "The name, man, the name!" Eve Langley wrote to me once when we were discussing a project for a book of her poems (still unpublished) to be illustrated by Norman Lindsay. But that still doesn't explain how the artist happened to acquire the particular kind of "name" that would move a poet to outcries of delight.

Of course there is the fact that Lindsay himself is a writer as well as a painter and that, though his books have never been much discussed by "serious" critics, he has an amiable habit of tossing off minor classics as a relaxation from the brush and easel. But he has preferred to figure in this country as a painter rather than as a novelist.

His critical writings may have had more influence in attracting the writers to his studio. When he talks to a young writer about the novel he talks with the twofold authority of a practitioner and a critic—a novelist with a score of books, published and unpublished, to his credit, and a critic who has read and re-read the masters, particularly Dickens and Conrad, till he knows everything that can be known about them. When he talks about poetry to a poet it is with the assurance of a critic who has written on the subject in the *Bulletin*, in *Vision* and the *Lone Hand* and who is an expert on the men he most admires, Shakespeare, Burns, Byron and Browning.

Writers undoubtedly come to him, too, not only because of the understanding he can bring to their work but because of the tremendous enthusiasm with which he receives it—if it is good. Bring him but twenty lines—but eight lines—of good poetry and he receives it as lesser men would receive first prize in the lottery. The writer who brings him a single short story with "the real thing" in it is likely to

leave his studio committed to writing a novel, reassured that he has the power and rather disconcertingly convinced that he has a duty to do it.

His skill as an illustrator, his name, his place as a novelist, his authority as a critic, his enthusiasm for anything that helps the movement of culture in Australia, these are some of the reasons why the writers seek his company. But the real, the basic reason lies deeper. Beyond anything else Norman Lindsay is a painter; and surely it is his paintings that have drawn the writers to him.

There is some quality in his work—not to be found in the same measure in the work of any other Australian painter—that calls to the novelists and the poets.

And there's not much doubt about what distinguishes his works from other men's: he paints women.

Well, he could paint women badly; he could paint them as if they were she-apes or dishcloths; he could paint them as propositions in geometry; he could paint them in the manner of the pre-Raphaelites, as if they were made of ectoplasm: but I don't think any of these methods would bring the writers to him for the privilege of his companionship over the long and perilous mountain track of literary endeavour. He paints beautiful women with all the beauty he can: that is closer to the solution. It is more than that.

She is there suddenly, lit by no torch or moon,  
But by the shining of her naked body.

He paints women as if they were goddesses.

I don't think enough attention has been paid in this country to the religious importance of Norman Lindsay's paintings. For surely it is a religious thing to say to the women of this earth, as these paintings do, "Your spirit is divine and your body is divine; these things are of the gods."

As to the divinity of his women in some of, though, of course, not all his paintings, there can hardly be any question. I take for an example in this volume (*Paintings in Oil*) the nude he has called "Reverie". That woman, naked



on the couch, her body one flowing nobility, her head thrown back, is more than mortal. Could you say to such a being, "Get dressed, we will go out to lunch"? The thought is a profanation. Could you offer her flowers, jewels? She is perfect as she is. Could you offer her love? Perhaps, but the secret of her being would elude you; she could never be possessed body and soul; she is beyond us, the eternally unattainable, the star that Shelley's moth desired; timeless, calm, curiously and supremely cool as if the chill of space was upon her, a goddess.

For me, at any rate, this is the finest of Norman Lindsay's oils; the finest because in it I see most clearly the flesh become spirit. The artist seems to have been able to perceive this strange, timeless calm—which I believe to be the very heart of the mystery of women—in only one of his models; and every time he has painted that girl he has achieved the same effect. She is the girl of the "Mantilla"; the figure on the left swathed in silk like a green moonlight in the picture entitled "Two Models"; and the fine lady of "Rita of the 'Nineties". Nearly always, it is worth noticing, the artist has painted this girl half in shadow—the eyes in shadow in the 'Nineties oil, that lovely face in shadow in the "Mantilla". She is a woman half of this earth, and half of the shadows. We do not know her. She is beyond us. She came down out of space.

When I see Norman Lindsay's paintings from this model I recall what John Cowper Powys wrote about the women of Conrad's novels, "their shadowy and abysmal reserve":

I think the secret of it is to be looked for in the amazing poise and self-possession of these women; a self-possession which is indicated in their moments of withdrawn and reserved silence.

They seem at these times to sink down into the very depths of their femininity, into the depths of some strange sex-secret of which they are themselves only dreamily conscious.

They seem to withdraw themselves from their own love, from their own drama, from their own personality, and to lie back upon life, upon the universal mystery of life and womanhood. This they do without, it might seem, knowing what they are doing.

They all, in these strange, world-deep silences of theirs, carry

upon their intent and sibylline faces something of the mysterious charm—expectant, consecrated and holy—which the early painters have caught the shadow of in their pictures of the Annunciation.

In this group of his oils Norman Lindsay has painted a mystery. In those of the others in which spirit is manifest he has painted an incarnation. Like all heavens, his has two kinds of angels—not the “good” and the “bad”, those are dangerous words, but at any rate the white and the dark—and in the painting called “Sisters” we see the two side by side. That dark woman of the “Sisters”, the swarthy woman of “Crete”, and the dark, rich, fiery creature in the centre of the “Pilgrimage to Venus”, they are the dark woman who has come down the ages in literature, the Medea of Euripides and Shakespeare’s Cleopatra; they could be brides for Lucifer, or they could represent spirit earthbound; they are full of struggle and hate and tremendous, passionate vitality. They are the eagle; and the white lady, she is the dove, she is all loveliness, all melting sweetness. She shines out of the “Homage to Balzac” and the figures of the earth stare after her in lust and astonishment. She blazes like white fire out of the “Don Juan”.

To do this, to reveal the spirit shining white or glowing dark through the flesh of man or woman, is the supreme achievement in art. And it is, particularly, the task and burden of the poet. All the arts, as far as I can see, have one great purpose: to reveal the existence of spirit. The art of the novelist, which is essentially an art of humour, reveals spirit chiefly by implication: the “message” of the great humorists such as Fielding and Dickens (and, incidentally, of Norman Lindsay’s comedies in paint) is that we might as well enjoy the comedy of life while we are living it, for it is *only a passing show*. The higher arts of poetry, painting and music bring the world of spirit to us by direct revelation.

Sometimes poetry and painting talk to us in the language of pantheism: the art of a Wordsworth and the art of a Hilder revealing the beauty of nature, showing that the earth itself is spirit or is visited by spirit. When a nature poet such as W. H. Davies brings us a tree that stands still

in the moonlight "with all his million leaves", time itself seems to stop still; we are in the presence of eternity. Sometimes the revelation is mystical, and we have the early religious painters that Powys wrote about or the poetry of a Blake or an Eliot: direct assertion of the existence of spirit.

In nature or in mysticism we find two of the great traditional pathways to the gods. Poets and novelists know that the third great pathway, which seeks to find the gods and the devils in man himself, revealed in human passion, is the hardest of all to travel. Offer a good description of a storm and anyone will say, "Yes, here the winds of heaven are blowing"; but how hard to describe the passions of a man so that he and they will seem equally sublime and terrible. Look at the sunset, and clearly it is the manifestation or at least the image of some supernatural beauty; but how hard to see that the girl from next door, both in her physical beauty and in the long, the unearthly-lighted, the endless reaches of her spirit, is also a visitor from the sky. We know each other too well, that is the trouble. Seeing so much of each other, we see nothing.

The hardest and the highest achievement in paint or words is to see man with fresh eyes. It is as if the artist himself had to step down out of the skies, out of some dimension of profound and shining tranquillity, and observe the world of men for the first time. If he can do that he peoples the earth anew. Before he came there was only the vague blur of humanity: now there are these men and women towering and burning in their uniqueness, these bewildered Hamlets, these doomed Macbeths, these delicate Juliets, these violent Cleopatras, these great fat Falstaffs, grotesque and pitiable and merry. Showing us all kinds of men in all ages, he shows us Mankind. And seeing man freshly, as if he had never been seen before, he shows us his passions raging like the winds, storming to infinity, divine and diabolical.

Norman Lindsay's is an art of this kind; a world art, a universal art. It is more clearly localized in Australia than may be generally realized—his novels alone, from *Saturdee* to *Redheap*, are a portrait of Australian man from infancy

to old age—but its real significance in the Australian culture is far more subtle and profound. Like the Elizabethan dramatists, Lindsay has searched all times and all lands for his themes and yet—what is more typically English than the Elizabethan drama?—the future will probably discover that he has been painting Australia all the time: painting, that is, the theme of man upon the earth as seen by a great Australian.

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